

Are We Awake?

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Orage examines sleep and waking as facts and as metaphors of our psychological and spiritual condition.

HOW can we prove to ourselves at any given moment that we are not asleep and dreaming? Life circumstances are sometimes as fantastic as dream circumstances; and change with the same rapidity. What if we should wake up and find waking life a dream, and our present sleep and dream merely dreams within a dream?

There is a traditional doctrine, usually associated with religion, but now and then invading great literature, that our present waking state is not really being awake at all. It is not night-sleep certainly, nor is it the ordinary somnambulism or sleep-walking; but it is, the tradition says, a special form of sleep comparable to a hypnotic trance in which, however, there is no hypnotist but only suggestion or auto-suggestion. In the first instance, from the moment of birth and before, we are under the suggestion that we are not fully awake; and it is universally suggested to our consciousness that we must dream the dream of this world—as our parents and friends dream it. Young children, it is notorious, find it hard at first to distinguish between this fancy, that is to say, their other day-dreams, and the dream their parents live in. Later in childhood, when the original suggestion has taken, auto-suggestion keeps us in the state more or less continuously. Our friends and neighbours, and all the objects we perceive, act as soporifics and dream-suggestions. We no longer, as in early childhood, rub our eyes in doubt of the reality of this world. We are fully convinced not only that it is real, but that there is no other. We dream but we do not doubt that we are awake.

Religion, it is obvious, presupposes that mortal life is a mode of sleep from which it is possible to wake up to eternal life. The New Testament, for example, constantly makes use of the imagery of sleep and waking. According to the Gospels and the Epistles we sleep with Adam and wake with Christ; and the refrain of the Doctrine is that we should strive to wake up from our present waking state and to be 'born again'. In recent literature the idea has been exploited by Ibsen and H. G. Wells among other writers. Ibsen's play, *When We Dead Awaken*, and Wells' novel, *The Sleeper Wakes*, assume in their very titles that we humans are asleep but can wake.

It is naturally difficult, of course, to convince ourselves that we are asleep. A sleeping person, in the midst of a dream, cannot usually wake himself up. The dream may be so unpleasant that it wakes him; or he awakes naturally; or he may be shaken into waking. Very seldom can one voluntarily wake oneself. It is even more difficult to wake voluntarily from hypnotic sleep. And if from these relatively light states of sleep it is hard for us to wake of our own accord, we can imagine the difficulty of waking voluntarily from the profounder sleep and dream of our waking state.

But how can we convince ourselves that we are really in a form of sleep when, as it appears to us, we are really awake? By comparing the two chief states of consciousness known to us and observing their strikingly common features. What, for instance, are the outstanding features of our ordinary sleep as known to us through our recollected dreams? The dream happens, that is to say, we neither deliberately initiate it nor do we create its figures and events. And in this respect it resembles waking life, in that we do not predetermine our experiences, nor do we create or invent the figures and events we meet from day to day.

Another common element of our sleeping and waking modes of life is the variability of our conduct. We are sometimes horrified, sometimes gratified, to recall how we have behaved in a dream situation. It is true that whatever our conduct may have been, humiliating or flattering to our pride, we couldn't have made it otherwise. Our disquiet or satisfaction is solely an account of the presumed revelation of our unconscious selves. But how, at bottom, do these facts differ from the facts of our waking life-dreams? In life-dreams also we cut a sorry or a good figure, not by pre-determined design but as it happens; and our regret or satisfaction is equally contingent on the effect the episode has upon our self-pride. But can we truthfully say, beforehand, that, whatever happens, we shall behave ourselves thus and thus and not otherwise? Are we not subject to the suggestion of the moment and liable to be carried away from our resolution by anger, greed, enthusiasm? Exactly as in sleep-dream, our

waking life is always taking us by surprise; and we are constantly behaving as we should not have imagined we could behave. Nor, in retrospect, can we truthfully say that we could have done better or worse in yesterday's situation. If it were repeated exactly, no doubt we could. But, taking it as and when it was, with ourselves as we then were, it could no more have been different than any night-dreams we have experienced.

Serious examination of the parallelism between the two states of sleeping and waking reveals many other similarities. One more only need be mentioned here—the close resemblance of our memory as regards the experience of the two states. It is true that of our waking life we preserve a more or less continuous recollection, whereas our dream-life is a series of discontinuous memories. But apart from this specific difference our actual memory-faculty appears to behave much the same in relation to both forms of experience. We know how difficult it is to recall at will a dream of the night before; the dream was vivid, and all its details were in our mind on awaking; but in an instant the whole of it has vanished, leaving not a wrack behind. Memory of yesterday's life-dream is not so treacherous, or capricious as regards its main features; but where today is the vivid detail of yesterday? We saw clearly a thousand and one objects, we even attended to them. We listened to conversation, we spoke, we watched men and things in the street, we read books or newspapers, we read and wrote letters, we ate and drank and did or perceived a host, that no man can number, of objects and actions. That was only yesterday, yesterday's vivid waking dream. How many of those details remain in our memory today; or how many could we by any effort recall? As completely as the dreams of the night, the mass of our life-dreams of yesterday fade into the oblivion of our unconsciousness.

It may be feared that there is something morbid in the foregoing speculations; and that an effort to see our waking life as merely a special form of sleep must diminish its importance for us and ours for it. But this attitude towards a possible and probable fact is itself morbidly timid. The truth is that just as in night-dreams the first symptom of waking is to suspect that one is dreaming, the first symptom of waking from the waking state—the second awaking of religion—is the suspicion that our present waking state is dreaming likewise. To be aware that we are asleep is to be on the point of waking; and to be aware that we are only partially awake is the first condition of becoming and making ourselves more fully awake.

