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**Imaginative Variations on Selfhood:  
Elaborating an Existential-Phenomenological Approach to Dream Analysis**

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**Abstract**

Dream analysis has occupied a central place in psychoanalysis for much of its history with a wide body of literature testifying to its utility at least within this particular theoretical perspective. Existential psychotherapy, which has its practical if not theoretical roots in psychoanalysis has however paid much less attention to the topic to, I want to argue, its detriment. Existential psychotherapists since Boss (1957) have of course produced important material but there has not been much further discussion or elaboration of the theory and practice of dream analysis since this time. In this paper I seek to further elaborate the dream analysis of Medard Boss and in doing so highlight the ways in which this aspect of the psychotherapeutic process might be better and more frequently used in existential practice. To this end, I supplement the work of Boss with recent developments in phenomenological psychology, notably the work of Ashworth (2003a, 2003b) and the Sheffield School, which employs concepts from key existential thinkers to better enable the analyst to understand the material they are examining. In addition, I seek to supplement the analytic givens highlighted by the Sheffield School with Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, which I will argue provides a vital key in unlocking a dream story.

**Keywords:** Dream analysis, existentialism, phenomenology, lifeworld

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Introduction

As is now well known, the existential approach to dream analysis focuses on the manifest content of dreams rather than the hidden or latent meaning that has been the project of psychoanalysis since Freud (1900). For Freud (1900), of course, dreams functioned to preserve sleep and work through unresolved anxiety by producing transformed representations of wishes that would otherwise wake the dreamer due to their disturbing content. This is not the end of the story for psychoanalysis however. More recent psychodynamic writers, whilst still maintaining that dreams and nightmares touch the surface of a person's hidden world, have sought to engage with dream material more phenomenologically. Indeed, as Flanders (1993: 1) states 'the focus of contemporary analysis is emphatically the dreamer, not the dream'. It appears that even some psychoanalysts are recognising the importance of working more readily with the manifest content of a dream or at the very least recognising the central role of the dreamer in constructing the meaning inherent in their dream. The growth of once a week psychodynamic psychotherapy has also resulted in radical change, where dream analysis no longer occupies a central place in the therapeutic process and is no longer seen as 'the only path to personal exploration and insight' (Jacobs, 1998: 84). Indeed, even amongst analysts there has been comparatively little work on dream analysis in the journals in recent years (Flanders, 1993). The analytic focus of many, though certainly not all (see Greenson, 1993, for a robust defence of the argument that the dream still provides the best route into the client's internal world), psychoanalysts has clearly shifted to examination of the transference and countertransference within the last twenty five years or so.

Still, it is surprising that there have been relatively few attempts to further elaborate the existential-phenomenological approach to dream analysis since Boss (1957). But perhaps this is because the aim for most existential therapists since Boss has been to treat dreams similarly to waking material. There is surely a danger with this strategy of missing some of the potential in working with dreams and the symbolism therein and I

seek to provide some arguments for the special place of dreams in existential analysis and further ways of engaging with dreams in this paper.

Firstly, on a practical level, dreams are presented in the therapeutic situation in a markedly different way to most client material. They are recounted stories that at least before being examined are self-contained: stories with a clear beginning and end. This particular format of presentation, often aided by the use of written dream diaries, offers a relatively unique opportunity to work and re-work client material much as the researcher may work and re-work the transcribed product of a qualitative research interview. The ability to systematically work through the material, with the client as ‘co-researcher,’ offers an opportunity for greater analytic rigour and the use of particular methodological strategies. In the course of this paper I offer one suggestion for such a methodological strategy: analysis following the Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology (Ashworth, 2003a, 2003b).

But I think the best reason for why dreams may still occupy a special place in existential psychotherapy, in spite of our disavowal of them as the royal road to the unconscious, comes from psychoanalysis and particularly, though indirectly, through the work of Winnicott (1971). Whilst Winnicott did not write much on dream analysis himself, his theories of symbolic play have had a significant impact on psychoanalytic dream work and could potentially impact on existential dream work. Winnicott (1971) emphasises the need to learn to play and dream within a transitional space that is protected from reality. That is, dreams occupy a particularly important role as a transitional space where a dreamer can engage in creative play safely away from the vicissitudes of everyday reality. Flanders (1993: 11) adds:

All cultural phenomena take place in transitional space, all creativity, either in formally defined space, the boundaries of the page, the canvas, the stage, or internally, through the capacity to stage an inner play. The ability to suspend disbelief momentarily, to give the self up to sleep and dream or reverie or free association, depends on boundaries ...

With this notion of dreams as transitional space for creativity comes the possibility of a new awakening for existential dream analysis. The boundaries of sleep can be seen to

provide an opportunity for working creatively with experience, perhaps as a kind of imaginative variation. The opportunity exists for us to vary the conditions of our experience in any number of ways and through the suspension of disbelief engage with the utterly absurd if necessary. This *play space for selfhood* will therefore provide content which reflects our current waking concerns even if relatively concealed and this is why, if we can help a client to explore the meaning of their experience, it provides a relatively unique opportunity for critical reflection on their sense of selfhood.

In the remainder of this paper I aim to show how an analysis which draws on the the Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology (Ashworth, 2003a, 2003b), enables the therapist to work with the client as co-researcher exploring and elaborating material that is not readily apparent in a dream. First, however, I will briefly outline the existing existential approach to dream analysis drawing principally on Boss (1957). I will then move on to describe the basis of the Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology and the givens of selfhood (identity), sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project, and discourse elaborated therein, supplemented by Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity. Finally, I present client dream work to demonstrate how incorporating the givens elaborated in the Sheffield School might prove a fruitful mechanism for enabling a client to further elaborate and reflect on the meaning of a dream.

### Existential dream analysis

The work of Boss (1957) is a key moment in the move from psychoanalytic to phenomenological dream analysis for the existential psychotherapeutic project. Boss draws extensively on the work of Heidegger (1962) to provide a radical alternative to the then dominant theories and models of dream analysis. In essence, he argues that the dream world and waking world must be treated, analytically speaking, in the same way since the relationship we have with the world of the dream is as real as the relationship we have with the world of our waking life. The analytic process therefore becomes a phenomenological one where the therapist and client work together to understand the meaning of the dream. There is no distinction between the subjective and objective dream content and instead Boss recognises how a dreamer simply demonstrates a

particular way of being-in-the-world through a dream. That is, a dream discloses a person's current concerns. Cohn (1997: 84) describes existential dream analysis thus:

The phenomenologist instead of distinguishing between surface and depth, tries to establish ever-widening contexts. Thus there cannot be a distinction between 'manifest' and 'latent' dream contents. But Boss rightly stresses that existential psychotherapy 'agrees with psychoanalytic experience that those realms of the human world which find admittance into the light of the dreaming Dasein are those a human being has not become aware of in his waking state (Boss, 1963:262). However, as Boss also emphasises, dreams are not something we 'have', they are an aspect of our being – 'we are our dreaming state' (1963: 261). They are not puzzles to be solved but openings to be attended to.

Boss (1957) recognises a number of dimensions of the lifeworld which he contends are present in both waking and dreaming experience including mood, temporality and spatiality but does not list the range (see below) that might be expected if one broadens ones philosophical influences beyond Heidegger. Furthermore, Boss does not suggest that the systematic examination of such givens should be an intrinsic part of the dream analytic procedure, as is proposed in this paper, but rather contends that these features of experience may be merely present in dream material and therefore worthy of consideration.

Of course, there has been existential writing on dream analysis since Boss (1957). Jaenicke (1996), van Deurzen-Smith (1997) and Cohn (1997) have all drawn on Boss to describe the process of existential dream analysis. However, it is only with Jaenicke (1996), at least in the English language literature, that there has really been an attempt to advance the extant work in this area. Jaenicke (1996) contends that, since all our relating concurrently refers to fundamental issues of being, dreams show what matters to us, ontologically speaking, in a most privileged way. For Jaenicke (1996:107) 'dreams, just like moods, confront us with our being-in-the-world as it matters to us.' That is 'Dreams embody and point to the ontological inclusion of our current ontic concerns' (ibid). This argument is important for it alerts us to the need to attend to

dreams and recognise their utility in facilitating an openness to perceive amongst clients and speaks to the argument being advanced in this paper.

### The Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology

The approach to phenomenological psychology taken by Peter Ashworth (2003a, 2003b) and his students at Sheffield Hallam University over the last thirty years to my mind represents one of the clearest approaches to a phenomenological psychological analysis grounded in existential theory. The Sheffield School approach builds on the methods of the more Husserlian inspired Duquesne School of Phenomenological Psychology (Giorgi, 1970, 1985) but is different in a number of key respects. First, the Sheffield School do not search for *essences*, or universal structures underpinning the phenomena being investigated, but instead focus on each individual's experience. There may of course be times when generalities emerge across experience but these are not presumed to exist in advance of the analysis. The second key feature of the Sheffield School, which distinguishes it from other methods of phenomenological psychology, is the belief that an analysis can be strengthened by consideration of the way in which experience will be structured by certain 'fractions' (Ashworth, 2003a) of the 'lifeworld' (Husserl, 1970) that are universal structures in all experience. These fractions come from the work of phenomenological and existential theorists including Husserl (1970), Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1957). Ashworth (2003) recognises that other writers on phenomenological psychology may mention some features of the lifeworld such as spatiality or temporality but never all the features, Ashworth contends, the existentialists mark out as intrinsic aspects of all experience. The person who has explicated most in this regard is Medard Boss (1979) but even he fails to incorporate all the features detailed by the Sheffield School whilst also including more speculative features, like being-towards-death which members of the Sheffield School seek to avoid in their analyses.

But what are these fractions of the lifeworld so key to a Sheffield School analysis? They are: selfhood (or identity), sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project and discourse. Many of these draw on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Ashworth (2003a, 2003b) describes each fraction through quotations from original existential theorists. But, in brief, selfhood or identity refers to that aspect of experience which might impact



on a person's sense of agency, presence and voice. Here identity is not something individual but rather something inextricably social or that which emerges between people in interaction as this quote from Merleau-Ponty (1962: 106) beautifully illustrates:

The body is no more than an element of the system of the subject and his world, and the task to be performed elicits the necessary movements from him by a sort of remote attraction, as the phenomenal forces at work in my visual field elicit from me, without any calculation on my part, the motor reactions which establish the most effective balance between them. Or as the conventions of the social group or our set of listeners, immediately elicit from us the words, attitudes and tone which are fitting. Not that we are trying to conceal our thoughts or to please others, but because we are literally what others think of us and what our world is.

Sociality concerns the way in which a situation affects a person's relations with others as all situations are intrinsically intersubjective. Embodiment relates to how the body features in an experience including consideration of gender, 'disabilities' and emotions. Temporality refers to the way in which we are always living in time and how the sense of time might serve to underpin the experience being described. Spatiality concerns a person's understanding of geography or space and place. Project is that aspect of a situation that relates to a person's ability to carry out activities which they have committed to and which they believe are central in their life whilst discourse concerns the language and terms, be they medical or ethical, legal or moral, used to describe an experience. Whilst the Sheffield School recognise the arguments of Heidegger about 'language being the house of Being' they strongly resist any attempt to reduce the lifeworld to language with the attendant loss of a conscious agent.

### Narrating the lifeworld

Whilst the Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology represents a particularly sophisticated form of phenomenological psychological analysis I want to argue here that it can be further strengthened, at least in the context of the therapeutic analysis of client dream material, through the addition of the notion of narrative identity (Ricoeur,

1988, 1992). The Sheffield School have not provided a great deal of information about the analysis of selfhood or identity other than suggesting that it is a key fraction of the lifeworld. The notion of narrative identity is made concrete by Ricoeur (1988) by comparing it to the experience of ‘working through’ in psychoanalysis, where a client substitutes a coherent narrative for fragments of their experience that they find unbearable. The story of oneself, at least in psychotherapeutic terms, then becomes constituted through the refiguration of previous narratives. In the light of this and the arguments that identity needs to be thought of in more dynamic and less essential terms it seems appropriate to take this opportunity to incorporate this version of selfhood into a phenomenological analysis of dream material.

For Ricoeur (1992), one’s identity is not established on the basis of some unitary and essential notion of selfhood but is instead based on the stories that permit recognition of the self. With this storied notion of selfhood we witness the mutability of selfhood and the possibility of creating different stories for the same events. The historical aspect of narrative leads to a chronicling of episodic experience whilst the fictional aspect of narrative lends itself to imaginative variation and since both components are intrinsic to narrative one’s identity is continually made and re-made over the course of one’s life. As Ricoeur (1986: 435) puts it:

If it is true that fiction cannot be completed other than in life, and that life can not be understood other than through stories we tell about it, then we are led to say that a life *examined*, in the sense borrowed from Socrates, is a life *narrated*.

It therefore becomes important to examine the story of the self being presented to the therapist in the context of the play space of the dream. What story of the self is being narrated in the dream and why now? What limits and possibilities for selfhood are recounted in the story? And how do these limits and possibilities relate first to the immediate context of the telling and then the wider context of the client’s being-in-the-world. If we accept that the dream offers the opportunity for creativity and play then it offers an opportunity to be creative and play with one’s narrative identity. It becomes possible to examine, within the relatively safe boundaries of the dream world, different ways of narrating the story of one’s life and the episodes contained therein. Such stories

of selfhood are aspects of dreams which are revealing of a key dimension of a person's way of being-in-the-world and as such require careful and critical analysis within the course of the therapeutic process.

### Elaborating the lifeworld through the dream

I would now like to turn to an example from my own practice to better illustrate the analysis being advocated. The dream comes from a thirty year-old man, whom I shall call 'Adam', who presented because of a 'low mood'. Much of our work together concerned his desire to be less self-critical and accept himself and those around him for good and bad. The dream I discuss here came late in the therapy, at about six months, shortly after we had discussed ending our work. At this point Adam was feeling more in touch with his feelings and better able to lift himself out of his low moods. He had engaged vigorously with the therapy and felt he was making real progress in taking control of his 'critical self'. When discussing the course of therapy Adam still felt that he had to work hard to keep his emotions in a state he was comfortable with and had hoped that he might be able to see things differently rather than work to actively change his everyday way of responding to the world. I thought Adam might be overstating the case somewhat as I felt his self-story, or narrative identity, had not yet caught up with the many changes in his behaviour he described to me. The essence of his dream was as follows:

He was in his father's car with his mum, dad, sister and wife. His mum, dad and sister were in the front seats and he was in the back with his wife. He found himself feeling increasingly trapped in the back and then noticed one leg was bent backwards and trapped down the back of the seat. He asked his father to stop the car so he could get some more space. He tried to get out of the car but was only half way out when his father drove off. He was trying to run with the one leg to keep up whilst his dad and sister were laughing at him. His wife and mother faded out of the dream. The car then drove into a tunnel and speeded up and he then could look back on himself and see his anguished contorted face. At this point he tried to stop the dream and woke with a start.

Once Adam had recounted his dream I sought to clarify the manifest content with him to produce the (abridged) essential summary statement (above). This involved clarifying exactly which figures occupied the central roles in this particular drama along with Adam's own role in the proceedings. This is a similar procedure to that found in phenomenological psychology where one seeks to garner a concrete description of a participant's experience in as much detail as possible to provide the material for further analysis. Following the elaboration of this initial concrete description I sought to explore the various fractions, or dimensions, of this description in a rigorous and systematic manner. As is common in phenomenological psychology I expected some dimensions to be particularly relevant and others less so. I explained to Adam that we would work through the dream together a number of times in order to discern what it means to him. Interestingly, when Adam presented the dream he offered his own interpretation without any prompting. Over the course of our joint analysis he came to appreciate an alternative meaning which he found more persuasive, arguably the only criteria that is appropriate for judging the worth of an analysis. I present some descriptive detail of those dimensions that appeared particularly relevant in the analysis of this dream experience before discussing the general analysis.

### *Mood*

First, we examined Adam's overall mood towards the dream and then in more detail through the various stages of the dream. Adam had found the dream quite disturbing and had woken as a result. It had left him somewhat shaken which is why he brought it to therapy, something he was not usually inclined to do. At the beginning of the journey he was quite comfortable in the car in the presence of his family, neither anxious nor excited. However, as the car journey proceeded he found himself feeling trapped, both physically and emotionally and with this rising anxiety felt the need to escape. This mood turned to fear and panic when the car sped off with him trapped halfway in/halfway out of the car. Finally, Adam recognised his own anguish, as he looked back upon himself being dragged inexorably into the tunnel.

### *Spatiality*

In the dream Adam's sense of mood was inextricably linked to his experience of space. His discomfort grew as he felt enclosed and then trapped in the back of the car. As he attempted to leave the car he could not leave the car space fully but became trapped

between two different types of space, one enclosing and simultaneously comforting and threatening, the other open and freeing. But the spatial aspects of the dream only really became central when Adam was able to see himself at a distance and recognise the anguish that he was experiencing being dragged into the tunnel in spite of his protestations to the contrary.

### *Embodiment*

Adam's sense of embodiment was in turn linked to his sense of space. His awareness of his own body became particularly acute when he attempted to leave the car and found his leg bent backwards down the back of the car seat. This clearly absurd movement was not experienced as pain but as constraint, constraint of him in a very real bodily way. His attempts to free himself were in vain and as the car sped off he tried to keep up until he split from his body, viewing it from increasing distance as he/it was being dragged into the tunnel.

### *Sociality*

The choice of protagonists in Adam's dream was clearly significant and we spent considerable time exploring and clarifying their role in the story. All members of his close family were present but most central were his father and sister who remained physically present in the dream throughout. His wife and mother, who had been present in the car at the beginning when he felt most comfortable, disappeared during the course of the dream. The significance of his sister became clearer when we explored his current thoughts and feelings about her. She had recently returned home to live and as such represented a return to a very dark period for Adam where he too had to return home to live. He felt his sister was trapped now like he felt he once was.

### *General analysis: Narrating a new identity*

Through the course of our descriptive exploration of the dimensions of Adam's dream his own awareness of its meaning changed. He began to recognise the way in which the dream represented a current preoccupying concern in his waking life concerning his sense of identity. Key to this understanding was a recognition of how much he had changed during the course of therapy and how much of this change came about through his growing understanding of his relationships with members of his family. The dream began with a familiar setting of a family car outing and this familiarity led to sense of

comfort and security. Adam was a passenger being driven by his father. This sense of having little control over his destiny increasingly led to a sense that there was not enough space in the back of the car and his profound sense of feeling trapped. His attempt to assert himself and stop the journey led to the loss of his most immediate support, his wife, and him being dragged along by the car against his will. His sister and her recent return home represented a particular fear since he had suffered a very low period in his life when he had had to return home previously. The anguish became particularly acute when he felt he had lost the battle to escape the family car and could only look on at his body being dragged into the darkness of the tunnel and the despair that he felt was there.

As our discussions of his dream continued Adam could see how he was working through the tension between retaining a sense of who he was through tradition and particularly in the eyes of his family versus the gain of new identity where he felt more in control of his destiny. And in spite of the anguished nature of his dream he came to see that the story was not hopeless as he recognised the possibility of re-fashioning the story of himself in relation with his parents. The dream provided a particularly valuable opportunity for Adam to work through key anxieties concerning his attempt to refigure his narrative identity in such a way that it better reflected his now changed but everyday experience of selfhood.

### Conclusions

This paper has sought to elaborate an existential approach to dream analysis building on the work of Boss (1957) and later existential writers. In particular, I have sought to suggest that dream material through its unique form of therapeutic presentation offers an opportunity for systematic analysis and, I suggest, this is best achieved through the application of principles from phenomenological psychology. The features of the lifeworld discussed by the Sheffield School of Phenomenological Psychology may of course be relevant in all practice and not just dream work but because of the need to maintain the quality of the therapist-client relationship in many cases this will not be possible in the here and now of the therapeutic setting. Because dominant cultural understandings of dream work are founded on psychoanalytic interpretation, clients will very likely expect the therapist to analyse their dream for them and so clients

themselves are likely to alter the therapeutic relationship to accommodate this different way of relating and allow for the systematic analysis advocated here. It is of course vital that this work does not dominate at the expense of the client's experience of the therapeutic process and sense of ownership of the dream material. It is the client's dream world that is being explored and this must never be subsumed beneath the analytic desires of the therapist. As always, the therapist needs to be guided by the client and what such an analysis may facilitate in terms of their openness to perceive the world.

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