

“Life is but a dream.”

Dreams are mysterious. There is an unresolved friction between the function of the body, mind, and soul in relation to dreams. Everyone dreams, usually while one is asleep. Some people do not remember their dreams and others are not even aware that they are dreaming. It is quite a perplexity, for dreams are not material. Rather, they are incorporeal. One is not able to put his or her finger on a dream. To add to the confusion, dreams do not follow a code. They are unpredictable. Unlike other operations of our mind and body, dreams are not systematic. Philosophers, religious leaders, and writers, to name a few, have wrestled with dreams for centuries. Some have attempted to explain dreams through the invention of entire religions, like Kaballah, have tried to provide answers justifying the existence of dreams. Ranging from the archaic to the contemporary, from Ancient Greece to to modern America, Plato, René Descartes, and Richard Linklater offer their ideas and opinions regarding dreams in very different ways. Socrates legitimizes dreams in *The Republic* while deliberating on the democratic character and the tyrannical personality. René Descartes contemplates dreams in both his *Discourse on Method* and his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. On the one hand, Plato and Descartes considered dreams in a strictly scholarly and academic manner. On the other hand, Richard Linklater addressed dreams both subliminally and deliberately in the script, artistic form, and philosophy of his film *Waking Life*. Dreams also embody different functions in each text. In *The Republic*, Plato lays blame on

dreams. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes both trusts and doubts his waking experience and his dreams. Finally, in Linklater's *Waking Life*, dreams offer an alternate experience of the world. In Plato's *Republic* and in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* dreams are dangerous, savage, and unstable images in one's mind, but in Linklater's *Waking Life*, dreams are euphoric and unbridled experiences. In all three texts, dreams represent a loss of control and a lack of authority.

In Plato's *Republic*, dreams are habitually represented as savage and inferior by Socrates. When one dreams, according to Socrates, her immoral desires are left uncensored. Socrates believes that dreams represent an irrational wild beast that has lost all sense and reason:

“The sort that wake while we sleep, when the reasonable and humane part of us is asleep and its control relaxed, and our fierce bestial nature, full of food and drink, rouses itself and has its fling and tries to secure its own kind of satisfaction.” (Plato 571c)

In Socrates' idea of a dream, one's unfavorable pleasures and desires are finally satisfied, even in the best people; “...but my point is this - that even in the outwardly most respectable of us there is a terribly bestial and immoral type of desire, which manifests itself particularly in dreams” (Plato 572b). Socrates finds comfort in the truth, otherwise known as waking life. Dreaming is, “simply the confusion between a resemblance and the reality which it resembles, whether the dreamer be asleep or awake” (Plato 476c), says Socrates. Throughout *The Republic*, Socrates portrays dreams as substandard and unsound images. “Any shadowy notion such a man gets hold of is the product of opinion rather than knowledge, and he's living in a dream from

which he will not awake on this side of the other world, where he will finally sleep forever” (Plato 534c-d). While attending to the education of philosophers, he equates opinions with dreams, an inferior experience, and knowledge with waking life, a superior experience. For Socrates, dreams serve as an explanation for the negative character in all humans.

In *The Republic*, Socrates also uses dreams as a means to describe the truth, which is only found when one is awake. To Socrates, when one is dreaming, she is deprived of the truth. “And so our state and yours will be really awake, and not merely dreaming like most societies today” (Plato 520c), Socrates says when addressing the role of the philosopher ruler. Socrates, “was concerned with the shameless nature of dreams,” he even compared those who dream to lunatics, claiming that dreamers “think falsely, when they imagine” (Niiniluoto). In Plato’s *Republic*, dreams bear responsibility particularly when he condemns them for the damaging attributes in certain people. In *The Republic*, dreams are free of the censorship of waking life, but not in a positive manner, for when one dreams, the brutish animal inside is unleashed. In *The Republic*, dreams are a demonstrative and illustrative tool used to help Plato prove his argument to his colleagues.

Like Plato, Descartes also uses dreams to find the truth, but Descartes views the mind in a different way. Descartes does believe that he must “be most diligent about withdrawing [his] mind” from the deceptions of dreams and senses, but he has more faith in his mind, for he believes the mind “can perceive its nature as distinctly as possible” (Descartes 66). In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes struggles with distinguishing between waking and dreaming and he has trouble understanding

and interpreting his senses. These difficulties compel him to doubt everything, except for the fact that he exists as a thinking being; “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses” (Descartes 66). He argues that “everything belonging to the nature of the body - could turn out to be nothing but dreams” (Descartes 66). Descartes asserts that he seems to sense and, “is cognizant of bodily things as if through the senses” (Descartes 66). He declares that “sensing” is a faculty of thought, and therefore, sense experiences are untrue. “I now see a light, I hear a noise, I feel heat. These things are false, since I am asleep” (Descartes 66). For Descartes, dreams serve to disprove the existence of the body and serve as the foundation of a belief that without our minds, our bodies would cease to exist. Again, following Plato, Descartes portrays dreams as ferocious and untamed. Descartes trusts his mind and his thoughts, but questions his dreams and the rest of the world.

In the film *Waking Life*, the protagonist appears to have intensified sensory experiences and has trouble waking up from a long-lasting dream. In other words, he has trouble distinguishing his dream life from his waking life. The protagonist's experiences are heightened both literally and metaphorically, for in one scene, he appears to be floating while engaged in a contemplative discussion of philosophy. Within the frame of itself, not within the context of reality, the film also provides ways to determine if one is dreaming, a difficulty Descartes faced while writing his *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. For example, if one switches a light switch on and off, but the intensity of light remains constant, she is dreaming. Of course, this revelation came in a dream, so its truthfulness can, and should, be doubted. In the film,

the main character “wakes up” many times, only to discover that he has awakened into another dream, he does not wake up to the real world. Dreams and reality blend in both the script and the style of the film.

Throughout the course of the movie *Waking Life*, the main character moves in and out of various philosophical discussions concerning free will, actuality, and the faculty of dreaming, but the film also has the appearance of a dream itself; it was filmed using an animation technique similar to rotoscoping which provides a watery and cascading appearance. As a result, the film flows both visually, having an aqueous appearance, and textually, for one philosophical debate runs smoothly into another. In *Waking Life*, dreams offer the protagonist and the audience unconventional and experimental perceptions of reality.

Each of these three works discuss dreams in different manners, but each text explores dreams within the context of the idea that dreams represent a loss of control and a lack of authority. Plato, Descartes, and Linklater, in discussing both how dreams function, otherwise known as the content of dreams, and how they are described, or the style in which each text is written, all believe that when one is asleep, the mind relinquishes the control and censorship of the waking mind to an unsuppressed stream of images and forms, otherwise known as dreams.

Plato and Descartes both believe that dreams represent an inner feral creature that is unleashed while we sleep. In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates discusses our “fierce bestial nature,” which is awakened when we fall asleep, that threatens reason and a life motivated by rational thought. Dreams put Socrates’ ideal society he constructs in *The Republic* at jeopardy, for his ideal state is driven by practical and logical thinking.

Descartes fears dreams. He is unsure whether or not to trust his dreams. Descartes associates dreams with false images and hallucinations. However, Linklater's representation of dreams is not as definite or as negative as Plato's and Descartes'. His film *Waking Life* does directly address dreams, like *The Republic* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, for the protagonist complains about being stuck in a dream. Nevertheless, his dream experiences are not as cynical as Plato's or Descartes' descriptions of dreams are. The main character has a series of enlightening and life-changing philosophical conversations with various people, ranging from close friends to teachers. He even discourses with a complete stranger. In Linklater's film, dreams are illuminating forces that inform a person while she sleeps; dreams shed light on issues one may have in life.

Though in Plato, Descartes, and Linklater, dreams all symbolize an expulsion of control, Plato and Descartes dismiss dreams and force them into negative light. However, Linklater exhibits dreams as optimistic and containing wisdom. Though Socrates verbally assaults dreams in Plato's *Republic*, he does not propose a solid plan to rid himself and his society of such falsities. Descartes, on the other hand, does provide an answer to his complaints about dreams. He suggests that one should doubt everything except for the truths that, "I am, I exist" and, "I think, I am" (Descartes 64-66). "Therefore I suppose everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed" (Descartes 63). Descartes refuses to accept the images he sees in his mind as true and certain. Linklater believes that dreams are appearances and uncertainties to be explored - in *Waking Life*, the protagonist makes a greater effort at continuing his philosophical journey rather than making it stop. Plato

and Descartes, though Plato less so, believe that dreams should be protected and restrained while Linklater sees dreams as opportunities to be examined. All three texts judge dreams critically, but dreams are determined to be guilty in *The Republic* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* and proven innocent in *Waking Life*.

Dreams are unpredictable. They are images formed in our minds while we sleep. They represent a relaxed censorship of our minds. Dreams have various functions in the works of Plato, Descartes, and Linklater. Each of these texts addresses dreams differently in terms of content and style. Plato discusses dreams systematically within the frame of his larger dialogue about ideal societies and Descartes explains dreams in a conversation with himself. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he is unsure of his mind, body, and soul. So far, Plato and Descartes have addressed dreams textually, using pen and paper. Linklater, on the other hand, addresses dreams in film. He not only has scripted his film to talk about dreams, but he has visually constructed the film to represent a dream. Plato, Descartes, and Linklater agree that dreams illustrate a loss of control and a lack of authority over one's mind. However, Plato and Descartes portray dreams in negative light: Plato describes them as the wild beast and negative character in each of us and Descartes does not trust his dreams dismissing them as delusions. Linklater respects dreams. In *Waking Life*, the protagonist has deepened and amplified experiences he would not normally have in his day-to-day interactions as he moves from one philosophical debate to another in a constant state of flux. In Linklater's film, dreams are pleasurable experiences. Even after deeply considering the works of several great thinkers, dreams are still bewildering. As the English nursery rhyme says, "life is but a dream."

## Works Cited

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