

Consciousness's Dream

On the One Who Is Dreaming Us (The Nature of Consciousness #42)

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The Dreamer of the World

Each night in dreams the mind creates a world and, at the same time, enters that world as one of its own characters. The dreamed world seems, to the one who inhabits it, to lie outside and beyond her, made of solid streets and open skies, peopled with others whose lives are their own. Only on waking does it become clear that the entire world, together with the person from whose point of view it was seen, was made of the very mind that dreamed it.

This familiar experience is the ground of one of the central analogies of the book, through which the relationship between infinite consciousness and each of our finite minds may be understood from within.

This week, we begin Chapter 17, 'Consciousness's Dream', exploring pages 167–169.*

*(*The page numbers indicated here each week refer to the original publication of the physical book – they may vary slightly from more recent versions, owing to the publisher's design modifications.)*

A Dream in the Infinite Mind

Each of our minds is a dream in the infinite mind of consciousness.

The infinite can only know the infinite; the finite can only know the finite.

Infinite consciousness cannot know the world directly because it cannot stand apart from itself as a separate subject of experience. It is a realm of infinite possibilities in which all experience lies enfolded. To realise this potential, infinite consciousness must divide, or seem to divide, itself in two, into a subject and an object. It is only through the perceiving faculties of the subject, the finite mind, that consciousness knows its own activity as the world.

Imagine a woman named Mary who lives in New York. One night Mary falls asleep and dreams that she is Jane, walking the streets of London. Mary's mind is, relatively speaking, infinite; all possible dreams lie in potential within it. She could dream she is Sophie in Amsterdam, Katie in Munich or Chloe in Rome, but tonight she dreams she is Jane in London. Everything Jane thinks and feels, and everything that seems to surround her, the pavements, the traffic, the faces of strangers, arises within Mary's mind and is made of it.

In this analogy, Mary's mind stands for consciousness, Jane's mind for each of our own minds, and the streets of London for the world. Just as Jane and the streets of London she perceives are the activity of Mary's mind, so each of our minds and the world we perceive is the activity of infinite consciousness. There is, however, one difference. Mary can have only one dream at a time; to be Jane in London she must forgo being Sophie in Amsterdam. But consciousness has innumerable dreams simultaneously. Each of our minds is one such dream, through which consciousness realises a segment of its infinite potential in the form of one of us.

The faculty of thought and perception that constitutes each of our minds is, in this vision, a current within a vast ocean of pure consciousness that is dreaming us, just as Mary is dreaming Jane and the dreamed world she perceives.

The Collapse into Limitation

Asleep in her bed in New York, Mary cannot visit London. Her mind as it is remains whole, undivided and without form. It cannot stand outside itself to know anything in subject-object relationship. To know or perceive anything, you must locate yourself in time and space as a separate subject of experience. So all dreams lie unmanifest in potential within Mary's mind. To manifest one such dream, Mary's mind must divide, or seem to divide, itself in two, a subject that knows and a world that is known.

An object or world can only be known from the point of view of a subject.

Her infinite mind has to collapse into Jane's finite mind, for it is only through and as Jane's finite mind that Mary can know the multiplicity and diversity of London.

Her unlimited mind narrows itself to a single point of view, and from that point of view a single world unfolds. The possible is exchanged for the actual.

For Mary, this is a kind of sacrifice, and it is freely made.

She has to forget or overlook the knowing of her own unlimited mind as it is and freely consent to limit herself in order to 'become' Jane.

Mary does not cease to be Mary when she dreams she is Jane; she simply overlooks herself. Her mind remains what it always is, and yet, for the duration of the dream, its own nature goes unnoticed. Likewise, infinite consciousness does not cease being itself when it seems to divide itself into numerous subjects and objects. It remains indivisible; the division is in appearance only.

This overlooking of itself is freely undertaken. Consciousness assumes the form of the finite mind to bring forth the potential that lies within it. It is a creative act. The overlooking of its own inherently peaceful nature is the price the infinite pays for the joy of tasting its own possibilities in the form of the world, and it pays that price willingly.

The Agency of the Separate Self

Infinite consciousness needs the agency of the separate self or finite mind to actualise in form the formless potential that lies within itself.

Here the separate self, so often treated in the contemplative traditions as an obstacle or an illusion to be overcome, is given its true dignity. The finite mind is the instrument through which the formless takes form, the means by which the infinite manifests and knows itself as a world. Jane is the agency through which Mary knows London; each of our minds is the agency through which consciousness manifests its infinite potential as the world.

At the same time, nothing is ever really divided. All the characters and objects in Mary's dream are made of her single, indivisible mind, and none of them ever actually parcels that mind into pieces. Likewise, all there is to each of our finite minds is infinite consciousness, and nothing that takes place within the dream of experience ever divides consciousness into a duality of objects and selves.

Multiplicity is how the indivisible appears from a localised point of view; it is a way of seeing, never a way of being.

Where Knowing Lives

From within the dream, things look very different. Jane experiences a multiplicity and diversity of objects and others, all of which seem to take place outside herself. Reasoning from the evidence of her senses, she notices that when she closes her eyes the streets of London disappear and when she opens them they reappear, and she concludes that whatever is seeing London must be located just behind her eyes. When she blocks her ears the sound of traffic vanishes, so whatever is hearing must live just behind her ears. Collating this evidence, she decides that her mind is located in her head.

In this way she comes to believe that being a body is her primary experience and being aware is a faculty of that body. Her entire outlook is predicated on this assumption. Believing consciousness to be located in her head, she necessarily believes that everything else, her body and the world, lies outside consciousness. Whatever appears to her, the streets, the traffic, the bodies of others, is understood to exist at a distance from the knowing with which it is known, standing on its own, independent of her awareness of it. She therefore considers everything to be matter, for matter is precisely that which is supposed to exist outside consciousness, the dead, inert stuff of which an external world would have to be made. The belief in matter and the belief that consciousness is located in the head are one belief, seen from two sides.

But,

. . . the knowing with which Jane knows her experience doesn't live inside her body. It lives in Mary's mind in New York!

Everything Jane takes to be evidence about the location of her mind is itself appearing within the very mind whose location she is trying to establish. Her eyes, her ears, her head and the streets they seem to reveal are all equally made of Mary's dreaming mind. The knowing of her experience was never generated by her body or contained within it; it belongs to the one who is dreaming her.

The same is true of the knowing with which each of us is knowing our current experience. It lives in consciousness, and even that way of speaking concedes too much to the language of place, for there is no inside to that which has no dimensions. The knowing with which these words are being seen and understood is unlocated, unlimited consciousness itself. Just as Mary's mind lives beyond the time and space of Jane's London, so consciousness lives beyond, and is untouched by, the time and space that seem so real from the perspective of the waking mind.

The Waking of the World

In the Bhagavad Gita it says that that which is known by the mind is unknown by consciousness, and that which is known by consciousness is unknown by the mind.

When Mary falls asleep, Jane wakes up, and when Mary wakes up, Jane falls asleep.

For Jane and her London to appear, Mary must fall asleep to her own nature. For consciousness to know a world of apparently separate objects and selves, it must overlook the reality of its own infinite being. The world, conceived by the finite mind as a multiplicity of objects made of dead, inert stuff called matter, comes into apparent existence when consciousness ignores itself, and it

vanishes out of apparent existence as a world of matter when consciousness recognises itself again.

This recognition changes what the world is understood to be rather than removing it. Even while Mary dreams she is Jane, all she ever knows is her own indivisible mind. Her experience of London is, in fact, her experience of herself, appearing through the lens of Jane's limited perspective. Likewise, our experience of the world is consciousness's experience of itself, seen through the aperture of the finite mind. The forgetting was never complete, and the intimacy we feel with experience, the sheer closeness of every sight and sound, is the trace of the one who is dreaming us, knowing itself as all things.

Each of us is, in this sense, both Jane and Mary. As Jane, we walk the streets of a world that seems separate from us and await a death that seems final. As Mary, we are the unlimited, unlocated consciousness in which the walker, the streets and the whole dream of experience arise, shine for a while and dissolve, leaving the dreamer as it always is.

We are both the individual and the universal. As the individual, we live, act and relate in time; as the universal we stand in eternity, at peace and in love.

The image shows the front cover of a book. The cover has a light beige or cream-colored background. The title 'THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS' is centered in a dark, serif, all-caps font. Below the title, the subtitle 'Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter' is centered in a smaller, italicized, serif font. At the bottom of the cover, the author's name 'RUPERT SPIRA' is centered in a dark, serif, all-caps font. The entire cover is enclosed in a thin dark border.

THE NATURE OF
CONSCIOUSNESS

Essays on the Unity of Mind and Matter

RUPERT SPIRA