



WHY WE DREAM

→
The definitive answer

JOE GRIFFIN & IVAN TYRRELL

*"One of the most important scientific breakthroughs
of the last hundred years."* Dr Farouk Okhai

WHY WE DREAM



The definitive answer

How dreaming keeps us sane,
or can drive us mad



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PUBLISHING

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FOREWORD

*“The effort to strive for truth has to precede
all other efforts.”*

ATTRIBUTED TO ALBERT EINSTEIN

No product of human thought and ingenuity exists in isolation. Every project is built on earlier efforts and the new findings set out in this book are no exception. Significant portions of the material content of *Why we dream: the definitive answer* originally appeared in a monograph that described Joe Griffin’s absorbing twelve-year research project, which he undertook with the aim of finding out why we dream. It was published in book form under the title *The Origin of Dreams: how and why we evolved to dream* and in *Dreaming Reality*

In it, Joe wrote up his key experiment, which he was the first dream researcher ever to think of carrying out. The experiment eventually led him to solve one of nature’s most enduring mysteries and to go on to unravel some of its implications. Reviewers who understood his achievement were effusive in their praise: “A major key to the nature of all psychic states”, “A giant leap forward” and “A watershed in our exploration of the evolution of mental processes” were typical reactions.

Although written for a scientific audience, *The Origin of Dreams* sold many thousands of copies to interested members of the general public, many of whom, as we know from numerous letters and conversations, were delighted to find that they could easily confirm Joe’s findings by studying their own emotional life and dreams. This was surprising to us because the requirements of scientific writing, and the necessary use of technically correct terms rather than plain English, made it not a particularly easy book to read.

Dreaming Reality, this book’s predecessor, was deliberately written

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in a style that was easier to follow. However, it was much more than a rewrite of the original; it was a fresh presentation, greatly extended, incorporating new research findings and more dream examples. It explored some of the practical applications, previously only hinted at, for what is now known as 'the expectation fulfilment theory of dreams', particularly in relation to improvements in psychotherapy and the treatment of depression and psychosis. The rewriting was done, then, not to dumb down the ideas but to take them further and, by using non-technical language as far as possible, to make them clearer and thus more accessible to a wider readership. *Why we dream: the definitive answer* has kept all these valuable changes but added yet more material to bring the content up to date, including work from other researchers that support the theory, and more dreams selected from the countless examples that people continually report to us, confirming its explanatory power.

We hope these ideas inspire you, and thereby enrich your life as much as they have ours.

Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell

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AN ANCIENT PUZZLE

“Such fantastic images give us great delight, and, since they are created by us, they undoubtedly have a symbolic relation to our lives and destinies.”

GOETHE

One bright morning, long ago in Greece, perhaps after pondering the meaning of a particularly vivid dream, the brilliant polymath Aristotle gave voice to a scientific challenge that has echoed down the ages: “We must inquire what dreams are, and from what cause sleepers sometimes dream, and sometimes not; or whether the truth is that sleepers always dream but do not always remember; and if this occurs, what its explanation is.” In the shade of sun-drenched olive trees at the Lyceum in Athens, where he and his brilliant band of thinkers used to meet, the father of natural sciences urged them to “obtain a scientific nature of dreaming and the manner in which it originates”.

Since those seminal times, 23 centuries have come and gone but, despite the best efforts of many of the world’s greatest minds, no satisfactory explanation was found. The answer to the question of what dreams are for, and their evolutionary cause, remained tantalisingly out of reach – a baffling mystery. In the 20th century, one of the pioneers of modern scientific dream research, Dr David Foulkes, reminded our own scientific community of why the central issue raised by Aristotle was still so important. “Dreaming,” he wrote, “needs once again to be recognised as a problem so central to the study of the mind that its resolution can help to reveal the fundamental structures of human thought.”¹

We are going to make the case that, since he wrote those words, the problem of what dreaming is, and why we evolved to dream, has at

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last been solved. And, as a result, a richer mental landscape is revealed to us, one that provides new opportunities to expand human understanding – not only for scientists, but for every curious individual. We can now view a scene quite different from what might have been expected by modern neuroscience and psychology, but one that is full of psychobiological explanatory power. This is the territory that Aristotle had the prescience to know was vital for us to explore and understand.

The breakthrough discovery of why we dream was made by Joe Griffin, one of the authors of this book, and offers a truly significant 'organising idea'. All good scientists recognise that the devil is in the detail but that real understanding comes from the type of thinking that produces organising ideas that are big enough to make sense of that detail.² An organising idea is always needed to shape our perception and our thinking. This is because we organise what we see through what we believe we know. Thus an organising idea determines where we look and will guide our research endeavours. A new organising idea is always bigger than earlier ideas because it has to explain the anomalies that previously caused confusion. All progress comes from this type of thinking, a fact that is in tune with the recent recognition that understanding human nature requires an open-minded, holistic approach – in this case, a recognition of the interdependence of the biological and the psychological. What is now commonly referred to as 'mind-body' research has developed rapidly in recent decades and has produced enormous advances in our knowledge of the relationship between the brain, immunity and disease, for example, as well as in psychology and behaviour.

Joe's breakthrough occurred because accumulated research data about dreaming and new technologies to facilitate sleep research had made it possible.³ It is truly an organising idea, in that the discovery of why we dream could only be made by integrating the findings of many disciplines, and thinking deeply through the implications until new insight occurred.

In the 20th century, the theories that arose to explain why we dream were divided into two broad categories – psychological and

biological. Psychological theories, mostly of the psychodynamic type (such as those of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, which we describe in the next chapter), held sway during the first half of the century until, in 1953, Eugene Aserinsky and Nathaniel Kleitman made a groundbreaking discovery. They identified a special brain arousal state, occurring periodically during sleep, that became known as 'rapid eye movement', or 'REM' sleep, because of the darting, swivelling action of the eyes during these times. REM sleep was found to have a close relationship with dreaming.⁴ (Further research soon showed that, during REM sleep, breathing became more rapid, irregular, and shallow; heart rate increased; blood pressure rose; and genital engorgement occurred in both males and females.) All this gave a great boost to the search for biological explanations for dreaming.

However, for any theory to account for the full complexity of human dreaming, there was clearly a need to integrate its biological and psychological aspects, as psychologist Dr Liam Hudson foresaw when he wrote: "This evolutionary puzzle [dreaming and REM sleep] and the question of the brain's operating principles are tied together, as [scientists] correctly assume. What they do not entertain is the possibility of an altogether more sweeping synthesis, and at the same time more rigorous explanation, in which these biological considerations are gathered together with another more strictly psychological one: the question of the formal properties implicit in the meaning of dreams themselves. In such a synthesis 'bottom up' and 'top down' theorising about the sleeping brain and its products would knit together, and the conceptual gap within psychology between mechanistic and interpretative modes of explanation would close ... Such a synthesis is as exciting a prospect as any psychology now offers, and eminently achievable – although at present it hovers in mid-distance, still out of reach."⁵

It was the realisation that Hudson was right that prompted Joe to set off on a research programme of his own (after reading all the available literature on the subject that he could lay his hands on). It became his passion. But it took 12 years before the full fruits of his

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work were realised. Since his theory was published as *The Origin of Dreams*,³ an academic monograph in book form, no scientist has disproved it and even more evidence has emerged to support it.

When Joe first published his answer to Aristotle's challenge, he had no idea of the wider significance of his findings. However, as a result of ongoing work over the ensuing years, remarkable new connections have emerged. For example, the relationships between dreaming and how we learn, dreaming and daydreaming, dreaming and creativity, and dreaming and problem solving, have made an important practical difference to the work of educationalists, whose attention has been drawn in increasing numbers. Many psychologists have realised that Joe's insight provides a unified theory of hypnosis and a new way to think about the nature of consciousness. Furthermore, the relationship between dreaming and emotional distress – depression, anger, addiction, anxiety and psychosis – has had such a direct bearing on psychological treatment that it has produced a new school of scientifically grounded, effective psychotherapy known as the human givens approach. This has had a powerful impact on thousands of lives in the UK, Ireland and beyond.

From the speed with which practical applications have arisen from this discovery about why we dream, it is clear that the synthesis Hudson looked forward to is no longer “hovering in mid-distance”; it has been made. And the story of how it was done, and what more it may mean for us all, you now hold in your hands.

2

EARLIER EXPLANATIONS EXAMINED

"Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in."

THOREAU

It is a human given that we dream. Every night when we sleep we enter a magical world where the normal rules of physics, propriety and logic no longer reign: a world where, one night, we can dine with royalty, converse with famous poets or sportsmen, or walk naked down the street and, on another, we might have the ability to fly or talk with animals. Dreams inhabit a mysterious place, saturated with intense meaning, where experiences range from the prosaic to the wondrous and bizarre, from blind terror to sweet sensual delights. It is hardly surprising, then, that from the earliest times in every culture humankind has had its theories to explain the strange happenings in the land of dreams. And it is hardly surprising, either, that dreams were first thought to be inhabited by gods and devils.

The ancient civilisations of Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, India and China took dreams very seriously, believing they were messages from the gods which often foretold future events. The Ancient Greeks, however, although still believing that the gods communicated human destiny through dreams, observed that not all dreams came true. Homer, Plato and also the Roman poet Virgil subsequently made the discrimination that true dreams came from the 'Gate of Horn' and false dreams from the 'Gate of Ivory', probably building on earlier ideas from Egypt and Mesopotamia, which also had a 'Gate of the Horns'.¹ Interestingly, as puns can often be found in dreams, the names of these gates also contain puns – the Greek for

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ivory is *elephas*, also meaning 'to cheat', and the Greek for horn is *karanoo*, which also means 'to accomplish'. Temples were erected throughout Greece to encourage, under the guidance of a special priesthood, 'healing dreams' which would indicate which medicine or activity was appropriate for the dreamer's ailment. Hippocrates placed great emphasis upon symbolism in dreams that he thought indicated particular ailments; for example, dreaming of overflowing rivers meant an excess of blood.

Aristotle, however, rejected notions of the divine origin of dreams. How could it be so, he reasoned, since animals could also be seen to dream? Instead, he saw dreams as residual sensory impressions left over from waking experience. Plato pointed out that, since our higher reasoning faculties were absent in dreams, this left the way open to the expression of unbridled passion. In all people, he claimed, there was a lawless wild beast whose presence is glimpsed in dreams of passion and anger. He also thought it possible to have morally superior dreams when reasoning is appropriately stimulated.

The most comprehensive work on dreams to come to us from ancient times are the five books of dream interpretation written by Artemidorus, who lived in Italy in the second century AD. He held a sophisticated view of dream interpretation, believing that the same dream could have a different meaning depending on the character and circumstances of the individual dreamer. But the idea that dreams contained divine messages persisted.

The Bible has many examples of God advising people by means of dreams, perhaps the most famous in the Old Testament being Pharaoh's dream of seven fat cows followed by seven lean ones. This Joseph interpreted as seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. And the New Testament, too, is full of dream references, particularly around the story of the birth and life of Jesus.

Dreams also played a major role in Islamic cultures. The Koran was said largely to have been revealed to Mohammed in a series of dream visions, each of which appeared to him "like the break of dawn". Ramadan, the ninth month of the Moslem year, celebrates the days leading up to the night when Mohammed received his first

revelations. Each day of Ramadan, Moslems fast from sunrise to sunset until the date of Mohammed's 'Night of Power' when, according to tradition, Gabriel first told him of his mission in a dream in which he ascended to heaven on a winged horse and met Abraham and Jesus. He was then given instructions, and he and his followers returned to Mecca before dawn. It is said that on this 'Night of Power' the gates of Paradise are open, the gates of Hell shut and the devils are in chains. (Gates were clearly a powerful metaphor in ancient times, perhaps because they were such a useful invention.)

Records show that Mohammed frequently interpreted the dreams of his disciples. Following his example, dream interpretation became a widespread feature of Islamic culture. An Arabian dream book of the eleventh century makes mention of several thousand dream interpreters operating at that time.²

The great Arab historian, traveller, statesman and Sufi, Ibn Khaldûn, in his 1377 introduction to his monumental history of the world, *The Muqaddimah*, described three types of dream. There are 'clean' dream visions that come from God, 'allegorical' dream visions that are inspired by 'angels' (higher human faculties of perception according to Sufis) and 'confused' dreams which are inspired by 'Satan' (the material world). He noted that, "When the spirit withdraws from the external senses during sleep, it can activate forms from memory which can then become clothed by the imagination in the form of sensory images". He also described a technique for inducing spiritual dreams which involved focusing a clear desire to have such dreams and the repetition of certain phrases, indicative of the "perfection of human nature", before falling asleep. He pointed out that this technique could only create a state of preparedness for such dream visions, it provided no guarantee of receiving them.³

Whilst Khaldûn was writing within the accepted religious orthodoxy of his day, this approach does hint at a sophisticated use of the potential of the dream state. From the research evidence explored later in this book in regard to creativity and dreams, it will become clear that the technique which Khaldûn describes would certainly facilitate the expression of a solution to – or knowledge of – a

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problem, arrived at unconsciously.

Whilst dreams remained important in the Islamic world up to modern times, in Europe during the Middle Ages studying them fell into disrepute and was progressively identified with 'the devil', sin and sources of temptation. This only started to change during the Renaissance, when artists like Giotto used dreaming as a metaphor for prophetic inspiration. To indicate this, he painted the saints asleep within pictures that portrayed the subject matter of the visions inspired by their dreams.

It was not until the nineteenth century, when writers such as Alfred Maury⁴ and Ludwig Strumpell⁵ emphasised the role played by waking experiences and emotions that were insufficiently inhibited during sleep in instigating dreams, that a more scientific approach to the topic began in the West. Ideas about the role of unconscious processes were also widely circulating by this time and it was Freud who famously pulled some of these ideas together, combined them with his theory of neurosis, and produced the first attempt at a systematic theory of dreaming.

Freud's censor

Sigmund Freud's theory of dreams grew out of his theory of neurosis. He saw a neurotic symptom as being a solution to conflict between a conscious wish and an unconscious repressed wish.⁶ Each neurotic symptom was, he believed, an attempt at simultaneously satisfying both wishes.

Freud noticed that patients often talked about dreams during therapy sessions. He saw dreams as the product of a conflict between the wish to sleep and unconscious repressed wishes from early childhood. He believed that, while we are awake, these repressed wishes are active in the unconscious but are held in check or restrained from entering consciousness by what he termed a 'censor'. He posited that, during sleep, however, this censor was not as alert as during our waking hours, and that repressed wishes, if sufficiently disguised, could sometimes get past it and be expressed in a dream. Freud believed dreams to be very similar to neurotic symptoms and that

they acted as the guardian of sleep, performing a protective role by allowing the expression of unconscious wishes that would otherwise disturb sleep.

He believed that the fact that we sometimes wake up from a nightmare was the result of the failure of a particular dream to sufficiently disguise the unconscious wishes being expressed. As a consequence, the censor was suddenly aroused to full waking alertness. Freud saw the disguise taken in the dream by the unconscious wish as the product of 'dream work'. (This is where Freud's theory becomes incredibly complicated. We contend that, if even our very brief outline generates a degree of cognitive indigestion, this is intrinsic to Freud's theory rather than our explanation of it!) Dream work was deemed to involve the condensing of material, so that a particular element of the obvious content represented several dream thoughts. It might also involve displacement, where a dream element's clear and obvious significance was far less than the disguised, concealed significance. It also involved representation – primarily the translation of a thought into visual images. The final process involved the replacing of a particular character or action with symbols. This happened, Freud thought, because of the need to disguise the salacious, largely sexual, nature of the hidden content.

Freud described the day's residue of problems, worries, unsatisfied wishes or purely indifferent material, as acting as, in his words, the 'entrepreneur' for a dream, and stated that the 'psychical capital' which made the dream possible was invariably a repressed infantile wish contained in the subconscious to which the daytime residue became linked. The images from waking experiences that were usually contained in the clear content of dreams came from a repressed infantile wish that saw an affinity with the waking experience and which used these images, and others from memory, as a sort of disguise to slip past the half-asleep censor and thereby gain a degree of expression for itself.

By now you are probably thinking that it must be well nigh impossible to discover the meaning of a dream with all this convoluted distortion ... yet more is to come. The waking mind, according to

Freud, gave a secondary revision to the obvious content of the dream story in order to give it a more logical façade. Freud declared that the real meaning of a dream could be uncovered by getting a patient to 'free associate' to each element in the dream that they had described. This free association process, he believed, unravelled the dream work and revealed the hidden wish or wishes that caused the dream. This random, open-ended interpretive technique adopted by Freud, where any dream symbol could be given a meaning associated with sexual desires or repressions of any kind, was what enabled the hermetic world of psychoanalysis to grow into the massive cult that it did.

Nowhere in Freud's self-declared masterpiece, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, did he actually give an example of an analysed dream showing an infantile wish as its source, although he did elsewhere. For the most part, he seemed to have been satisfied with his own confident interpretation of a repressed wish of recent origin, usually sexual in nature, being the source of any dream he 'analysed'. Many people have commented on the singular oddness of Freud's ideas and how they crumble when faced with empirical evidence (that is to say, facts). Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, pointed out that, "Freud very commonly gives what we might call a sexual interpretation. But it is interesting that among all the reports of dreams that he gives, there is not a single example of a straightforward sexual dream. Yet these are as common as rain."

Jung's myths and legends

Carl Jung was a colleague of Freud who became increasingly disaffected with what he felt to be Freud's doctrinaire approach to the investigation of dreams and neurotic symptoms. He came to believe that, while Freud's free association method of dream interpretation might lead to the identification of the dreamer's psychological complexes, it nonetheless led away from the real meaning of the dream. He could not accept that the meaning was hidden or disguised to get past a censor so that it could enter consciousness. For him, the symbols in a dream were the natural form in which the unconscious expressed itself. He saw dreams as the unconscious mind's way of



“[This book] *exquisitely scythes through the Gordian knot created by past dream theories ... it provides lucid and compelling evidence for how our night- and daydreams not only mould our personalities but also lie at the very heart of being human.*”

Dr Clive Bromhall, author of *The Eternal Child*

Why we dream: the definitive answer

THE remarkable story of how the Irish psychologist Joe Griffin went on a quest to discover why dreaming evolved – and eventually succeeded. With a strikingly simple, intuitively and scientifically satisfying explanation for why we dream, he reveals what dreams do for us and gives readers the key to understanding their own remembered dreams.

Since earliest times, humankind has puzzled over and been inspired by the self-evident symbolism in dreams. In modern times the phenomenon remained a mystery to science – until the explanation revealed in this book was announced, tested and found useful.

Thanks to Griffin's experiments and his 'expectation fulfilment theory' we now know that dreaming keeps us sane, or, in certain circumstances, can drive us mad (psychotic). And this knowledge has opened up wonderful new possibilities for humanity: greater creativity; improved mental health and deeper understanding of who we are.

Why we dream is full of real-life stories, dream examples and case histories. It also explains why dreaming and daydreaming are crucial to human development, and why stories and metaphors have universal appeal. *Why we dream: the definitive answer* will genuinely change lives and rejuvenate psychology.

Key topics covered:

- How to work out what our dreams really mean
- How daydreaming, hypnosis, creativity, dreaming and lucid dreaming are related
- Why our dreams seem so intense and significant when we experience them, and yet are so easily forgotten
- Why everyone loves stories
- The connection between learning and dreaming
- Review of ancient and modern dream theories
- Why depressed people always wake up exhausted
- The connection between emotions and dreams
- Why psychotic people appear to be living out bad dreams
- Why animals dream differently from us ... and much more