

Part III

“EVERYBODY’S NOBODY”

Consciousness, Existence,
and Identity

UNCORRECTED PROOFS

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10

A Dream Inside a Locked Room

The Illusion of Self¹

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In the third episode of season one of *True Detective*, “The Locked Room,” detective Rust Cohle explains that your life, all your subjective experiences, are “a dream ... inside a locked room, a dream about being a person.” In his view, we are creatures who “labor under the illusion of having a self.” These ideas—that all of life is a dream, that we might think we’re awake when we’re really dreaming, and that the self is an illusion—are some of humanity’s oldest and most enduring philosophical thoughts, in both Eastern and Western traditions. So, too, is the question of whether transcendence—deliverance or awakening from the dream—is possible, especially at the moment of death. This question consumes Cohle and is a driving question of the whole of the first season of *True Detective*.

Life Is a Dream

In “The Locked Room,” Cohle tells the two police officers interviewing him that when you look into a dead body’s eyes—even in a picture—you see “an unmistakable relief.” You can tell that the person, having been afraid, saw, “for the very first time, how easy it was to just let go.” Cohle links this realization about death to the realization that life is a dream: “In that last nanosecond, they saw

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what they were—that you, yourself ... all your life ... was all the same dream, a dream that you had inside a locked room, a dream about being a person.”

Cohle tells his partner, Marty Hart, in “The Long Bright Dark,” that “we labor under the illusion of having a self.” Death releases us from the labor and ends the dream. Yet Cohle seems ambivalent. On the one hand, he says that, in the last moment, you can let go and realize your life was a dream—the implication being that death delivers us from the dream. On the other hand, he ends his musings to the two detectives by saying, “And like a lot of dreams, there’s a monster at the end of it.” So, at the end, are we delivered from the dream or does the dream turn into a nightmare?

This worry encapsulates Cohle’s ambivalence about human life. His existential predicament is that he’s driven to seek transcendence—deliverance from illusion—yet all the while he denies or doubts that transcendence exists. This predicament makes him not just a “pessimist” (as he describes himself) but also a “nihilist”—someone who denies that life has meaning (because meaning could come only from transcendence) but who can’t help yearning and searching for it anyway.

I’ll come back to nihilism later. First I want to talk about Cohle’s statement that life is a dream about being a person.

Eastern Views

The idea that life might be a dream, and hence that the world you perceive and the self you seem to be or have aren’t real, is one of humanity’s oldest and most enduring philosophical thoughts. So, too, is the idea that, if life is a dream, death might bring deliverance from it, either by being a peaceful state like deep sleep, undisturbed by any dream, or by being a kind of higher or greater awakening. (These ideas are central themes of my book *Waking, Dreaming, Being*.²)

The oldest versions of these ideas come from Indian philosophy. In the *Upanishads*, ancient Indian scriptures dating back to the seventh century BCE, the whole of sentient existence—which includes not just this life but also a beginningless series of previous lives and an endless succession of future ones—is like being in one big

locked room, in which we dream, over and over again, of being a person (a different person for each life). We think we're free, but we're really chained to an endless cycle of misidentification with a series of illusory, dreamed characters. Liberation, true freedom, comes from waking up from this otherwise never-ending dream. Awakening and release, however, can happen only when we realize through deep meditation that our self as it appears to us in both waking life and the dream state is unreal, and that our true self (*ātman*) is pure, cosmic being (*brahman*). Attaining this realization provides freedom at death, so that there is no longer the dream of being a person—of being a limited self—but instead the blissful experience of oneness and unlimited being.

A thousand years later, the Hindu philosophers, Gauḍapāda (ca. eighth century CE) and Śaṅkara (788–820 CE), who inaugurated the Advaita Vedānta school, systematized these ideas in their philosophical commentaries on the *Upanishads*. They argued that the self and the world as they appear in the waking state are illusions produced by the mind, a false reality like what we see in a dream. The individual self is an ignorant mental superimposition onto the one universal consciousness, which is no different from pure being and limitless bliss.

A different version—still from India—of the idea that the self is an illusion comes from the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fourth to fifth centuries CE). In his view, unlike that of the Vedāntins, there is no true self in the form of universal consciousness; there are only innumerable many distinct streams of awareness, each of which is “empty” of a self—that is, empty of anything that would “own” the awareness and be the thinker of thoughts and the doer of deeds. Analyzing each mental stream reveals that it's really just a series of impersonal, transitory, and discrete moments of awareness, with each prior moment related to the next one as cause to effect. The illusion of self arises from the feeling of there being an “I” present at each moment and of its being the same “I” from one moment to the next. In reality, however, no “I” or owner is present at any point, so the impression of self is an illusion.

Vasubandhu also argued that the perceptual world is like a dream or a magician's illusion, because it doesn't exist in the way that it appears to exist. It appears to exist as an independent,

physical world, but it's really just a projection of the mental stream. Like a dream, it has no reality independent of the mind. Moreover, there's no self behind the scenes responsible for the projection; there's only the cause-effect series of dependent, mental events, which produce the illusion of a self as a result of ignorance and attachment to the "I" feeling. Enlightenment or awakening requires seeing through the illusion of an independent self and an independent world, and eliminating all attachment to it.

In ancient China, the philosopher Zhuang Zhou (369–286 BCE ...) also likened life to a dream. In his famous parable known as "The Butterfly Dream," he wrote:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would. He followed his whims exactly as he liked and knew nothing about Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and there he was, the startled Zhuang Zhou in the flesh. He did not know if Zhou had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. Surely, Zhou and a butterfly count as two distinct identities! Such is what we call the transformation of one thing into another.³

In this parable, there is an undecidable alternation between being a butterfly and being a person, with each phase being equally awake and dreaming. The traditional interpretation of this parable relates it to life and death. Guo Xiang (252–312 CE), the first and most important commentator on Zhuang Zhou, put it this way: "The distinction between dreaming and waking is no different from the differentiation, the debate, between life and death."⁴ Dreaming is no less real than waking; death is no less real than life. The "transformation of one thing into another" includes waking and dreaming, as well as life and death.

Zhuang Zhou also wrote about what he called the "great awakening": "Perhaps a great awakening would reveal all of this to be a vast dream. And yet, fools imagine they are already awake—how clearly and certainly they understand it all!"⁵

Western Views

In Western philosophy, the thought that life could be a dream is linked not so much to reflections on life, death, and transcendence as it is to the problem of whether it's possible to have certain

knowledge (a problem known as “philosophical skepticism”). For example, in Plato’s (428–348 BCE) dialogue *Theatetus*, Socrates asks the young mathematician Theatetus what evidence he could have to prove either that they’re awake and talking to each other or that they’re asleep and all their thoughts are a dream. Theatetus admits he doesn’t know how to prove the one any more than the other, for the two states seem to match; even dreaming that you’re telling someone a dream seems strangely similar to really telling someone a dream. “So you see,” Socrates concludes, “it is disputable even whether we are awake or asleep.”⁶

Two thousand years later, René Descartes (1596–1650) asked the same question in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he argued that there are no “sure signs” to differentiate with complete certainty waking-sense experiences from dream experiences.⁷ Any sign you point to—for example, sensory vividness—could also be present in a dream.

One way to draw together these Eastern and Western philosophical threads is with the following line of thought, taken from Wendy Doniger’s classic book on Indian and Western views of dreaming, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities*.⁸ We can verify the hypothesis that we’re dreaming by waking up—either from the dream (normal waking) or within the dream (lucid dreaming). And (what amounts to the same thing) we can falsify the hypothesis that we’re awake by waking up—again either from the dream or within the dream. But we can’t falsify the hypothesis that we’re dreaming or (what amounts to the same thing) verify the hypothesis that we’re awake. The reason is that for any experience we choose—specifically, any experience we take to be a waking one—it seems conceivable that we could wake up from that experience (remember Zhuang Zhou’s “great awakening”).

Modern brain science puts a new twist on the idea that life is like a dream and the self is an illusion. In the 1990s, neuroscientists Rodolfo Llinás and Denis Paré proposed that our consciousness presents us with a model of the world constructed by the brain. When we’re awake, the model relies more on external, sensory information, and when we’re asleep and dreaming it relies more on memories and expectations. The model in the two states is basically the same; it’s only the main information source that differs. For this reason, Llinás and Paré described dreaming as a special case of perception without external sensory input and perception

as a special case of dreaming with external sensory input. In Llinás' words: "Comforting or disturbing, the fact is that we are basically dreaming machines that construct virtual models of the world."⁹

"Neurophilosopher" Thomas Metzinger applies this idea to the self. He argues that the brain generates its own internal model of the world and includes in the model a self that knows this world. In this way, the brain is always "dreaming at the world," including dreaming that it is or has a self. The principal difference between wakefulness and dreaming is that the brain's activity has closer ties to sensory and motor information from the outside world in wakefulness than it does in dreaming. Nevertheless, in both cases, the brain generates an image of a real, independent self, but in reality there is no self; there's only the brain's model of a self. In Metzinger's words, "no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever had or was a self. ... All that ever existed were conscious self-models that could not be recognized as models."¹⁰

Cohle seems to have read Metzinger, because he states this viewpoint to Hart in the first episode: "We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self. This accretion of sensory experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact everybody is nobody."

Pessimism and Nihilism

Cohle says that he is, in philosophical terms, a "pessimist." As several others explain in their chapters in this volume, pessimism is associated with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). Schopenhauer was influenced by early, inaccurate European translations of Indian philosophical texts, and he misunderstood Buddhism and Hinduism as pessimistic religions, ones that believe human existence is inherently unsatisfactory and that the best thing for humans is not to exist (whereas, on the contrary, both religions assert that human existence provides a precious opportunity for true awakening or enlightenment, and both uphold the value of selfless love). Cohle, at the outset of the story, subscribes to these pessimistic beliefs. As he says to Hart:

I believe human consciousness is a tragic misstep in evolution. We became too self-aware. Nature created an aspect of nature separate

from itself; we are creatures that should not exist by natural law. ... I think the honorable thing for our species to do is deny our programming, stop reproducing. Walk hand in hand into extinction, one last midnight—brothers and sisters opting out of a raw deal.

Although Cohle is right that these beliefs make him a pessimist, he's better described as a "nihilist" in the sense that Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) gave to this term and that he used to describe Schopenhauer. Nietzsche wrote:

A nihilist is a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist. According to this view, our existence (action, suffering, willing, feeling) has no meaning.¹¹

This statement captures Cohle's beliefs: the world as it is with human consciousness ought not to exist, and the world as it ought to be—either minus human existence or with real meaning and transcendence—does not exist. When Hart asks "What's the point of getting out of bed in the morning?" Cohle answers, "I tell myself I bear witness, but the real answer is that it's obviously my programming, and I lack the constitution for suicide." This is the nihilist's predicament—being incapable of giving up on meaning (what's the point of bearing witness if there's no meaning?) and continuing to experience things (such as the self) as having a reality that one believes or senses is an illusion.

Nihilism, in this philosophical sense, comes from a deep insight gone awry. The insight is that things do not have the kind of being or reality that they seem to have. They seem to have their own intrinsic and independent being, but upon analysis they turn out to be relational and interdependent. There seems to be an independent "I," with its own intrinsic identity, but upon analysis there turns out to be only a constantly changing web of interdependent physical and mental processes that make up what we think of as a person. Where this insight goes awry, however, is in the inference that nothing has any meaning and that everybody is nobody. The mistake is to suppose that, if there were meaning, it would have to be grounded in something that has intrinsic and independent being—such as God or the self or the soul. In this way, the nihilist accepts the absolutist's premise about what meaning is, but then,

upon realizing that this kind of intrinsic being is nowhere to be found, mistakenly concludes that there is no meaning. In the case of the self, the nihilist accepts the premise that, if there were a self, it would have to be an independent thing or entity (a “substance,” in philosophical terms) and then, upon realizing that this kind of self is nowhere to be found, mistakenly concludes that there is no self in any sense and that everybody is nobody.

In *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, I call this viewpoint “neuro-nihilism.” The neuro-nihilist says that our brain creates the illusion of self and that we can’t help but labor under the illusion, because that’s the way our brain is designed. I argue against neuro-nihilism. Although I agree that there’s no ready-made thing or entity or substance that is the self, and that our sense of self is a biological, psychological, and social construction, it doesn’t follow that it’s nothing but an illusion and that everybody is nobody. The self isn’t a thing; it’s a process—one that enacts an “I” and in which the “I” is no different from the process itself, rather like the way dancing is a process that enacts a dance and in which the dance is no different from the dancing. From this “enactive” perspective, although meaning and the self have no absolute foundation, neither are they complete illusions or nonexistent; they’re brought forth in how we act and live our lives.

Transcendence

In the last episode of season one, Cohle, in the hospital after having almost been killed, tells Hart about his experience of nearly dying. The story comes back to the question—the driving one of the whole drama—of whether, at the end, as we realize life is a dream, we’re delivered from the dream or it turns into a nightmare with a monster waiting for us. What Cohle earlier saw in the dead victims’ eyes—“how easy it was to just let go”—happened to him. Reduced to a “vague awareness in the dark,” his “definitions fading,” he feels another deeper and warmer darkness, permeated by love and the presence of his dead daughter and father. He lets go into the darkness, affirms it, and feels nothing but love. And then he wakes up. Transcendence—of the dream of being a person, of laboring under the illusion of self—is possible after all and comes from selfless love.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this chapter originally appeared online at *The Critique*.
2. Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).
3. Brook Ziporyn, trans., *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 262.
5. *Ibid.*, 19.
6. Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *Theaetetus and Sophist*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1921), 158c–d.
7. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, second edition, trans. and ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 16.
8. Wendy Doniger, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 37–52, 175–205; see also my *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, 94.
9. Rodolfo Llinás, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 94.
10. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 1.
11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 318.