

PROFESSOR MALCOLM ON DREAMING

Professor Norman Malcolm's little book *Dreaming* is a neat little essay in the Wittgensteinian tradition. It seeks to prove a strange thesis, viz. that dreaming is not an actual mental process taking place during sleep. The general view of philosophers and laymen alike is that a dream is the life of the soul during sleep. Against this thesis Malcolm argues that the idea of a dream being an actual mental phenomenon taking place in sleep is meaningless. The argument used to prove this thesis is ingenious and complicated. Though not always easy to follow, and often very puzzling, nevertheless it is always closely reasoned and clearly expressed. Yet it seems to me that it is not conclusive. I wish in this paper to examine this argument. I am not versed in the Wittgensteinian ways of thought, and it is very likely that my failure to be convinced by Malcolm's argument is due to my own shortcomings. Nevertheless, I think it worthwhile to examine it and try to say why it seems to me inconclusive, if only because some Wittgensteinian scholar will show me where I am wrong.

I

The argument begins by making an apparently commonplace and unexciting thesis, (I shall call it thesis I), viz. that there cannot be any thought in sleep. But though the thesis is commonplace, the argument used to prove it is not; and the implications drawn from it are certainly startling. One of the implications is that since there cannot be any thought in sleep, and since dreams occur only during sleep, dreams cannot be mental phenomena taking place during sleep. When this implication of Thesis I is pointed out, one wants to hasten to add the following qualification to the thesis that there cannot be thought in sleep, viz. except dreams. But according to Malcolm this qualification is impossible; the argument used to prove the thesis leaves no room for any such exception.

The argument for Thesis I is the following. No one can use the expression "I am asleep" to describe his present state; it amounts to a kind of contradiction. For to *assert* (and not merely

utter the words) "I am asleep" is to show conclusively that one is *not* asleep and therefore to contradict what one is asserting. (p. 7) Next, it is shown that not only is "I am asleep" not a possible *assertion*, it is also not a possible *judgement*. "In order to know that when a man said 'I am asleep' he gave a true description of his own state, one would have to know that he said it while asleep *and* that he was *aware* of saying it. This is an impossible thing to know, because whatever showed that he was aware of saying that sentence would also show that he was not asleep. The knowledge required is impossible because it is self-contradictory." (pp. 10-11). "The sentence 'I am asleep' cannot have a correct use to describe one's state and therefore it is not a vehicle for a possible judgement." (p. 14) "The proof that the sentence 'I am asleep' cannot have a correct use as a present indicative, amounts to a proof that it cannot express a possibility" (p. 18).

The next step in the argument is to generalise this conclusion. Malcolm says that the argument which proves that it is impossible to make the judgement that one is asleep also proves that it is nonsensical to suppose that a person could make *any* judgement while asleep (p. 36). The logical absurdity of 'I am asleep' is that it would be self-contradictory to verify that a man was both asleep and judging that he was, because whatever in his behaviour showed that he was making the judgement would equally show that he was not asleep. And this would be so whatever the judgement was (p. 36). The notion that someone is both asleep and judging is senseless in the sense that nothing can count in favour of either its truth or its falsity; the verification of such a notion is self-contradictory (p. 37).

This conclusion is further generalised in chapter 10. Not only judgements, but all mental activities, and even "passivities" like fear, anxiety, joy, illusions and hallucinations and images—all these are covered by the argument. The notion of anybody having any of these in sleep is senseless because its verification is self-contradictory (p. 37).

Now, from this thesis Malcolm's theory of dreaming follows simply. If there cannot be any mental activity or passivity in sleep, and if nevertheless dreams occur in sleep, it follows at once that dreams cannot consist of any thoughts or images or any mental processes occurring in sleep. But will it not follow from

this argument that there are no dreams? Malcolm says No. For, in order to establish that someone had a dream it is not necessary to prove that he had a thought or an image or what not while asleep; the criterion of someone's having had a dream is that upon awaking he tells a dream. Since then it is often established that someone had a dream, but nonsense to say that a thought, an image, etc. could have occurred in sleep, it follows that dreams cannot be mental processes taking place in sleep. "If it is theoretically impossible to verify that someone had images, say, in his sleep, but possible to verify that he dreamt, then dreams cannot be identical with, nor composed of, images experienced during sleep" (p. 51).

Two more points in Malcolm's theory need mention. (i) Since a dream is not an actual occurrence taking place in sleep a dream is reduced to the after-sleep impression of having experienced something during sleep. There is nothing, over and above the waking impression, which took place in sleep of which the impression is a "memory" or the report a description; no question whether there is correspondence between the dream and the impression can arise, because such a question would be meaningless. (ii) It also follows from Malcolm's theory that dreams cannot have any temporal location or duration. If a dream is not an actual occurrence at all, then the question of its temporal location or duration cannot arise.

The above is a brief summary of Malcolm's argument. I shall now proceed to examine it.

II

It is interesting to see how much is arbitrarily stipulated in the name of ordinary language in Malcolm's argument. (i) First, it is taken for granted that a state is to be called one of sleep only if "the behavioural criterion" of sleep is completely satisfied. This criterion is that during sleep a man's body is relaxed and motionless, his eyes closed and breathing regular, that he is unresponsive to various sounds and movements in his vicinity to which he would normally react if awake. From this stipulation it is then inferred that the state of a person having a nightmare is not sleep, but only "a phenomenon reassembling sleep".

(ii) Secondly, it is assumed that dreams can occur only during sleep as understood above. From this it follows that nightmares and other dreams in which there is behavioural evidence of mental activity during sleep are not dreams "in the primary sense" of the term. His concept of dreaming as something which is not an actual occurrence and which has as its sole criterion the dreamer's after-sleep report follows easily from these stipulations. It would be interesting to enquire what grounds Malcolm gives for these stipulations; for unless some satisfactory grounds can be given his theory would be true only by definition.

If we attend to the ordinary use of the words "sleep" and "dream" we shall find that the two concepts, as ordinarily employed, are not at all well-defined. There are many kinds of dreams and in all of them the dreamer is regarded as a sleeper. Malcolm tends to think that for a state to qualify as a sleep it must be absolutely devoid of behaviour. But ordinary language certainly recognises dreams in which the sleeper shows behaviour. In this class of dreams we may distinguish (i) dreams called nightmares and (ii) dreams in which there is not violent but mild behaviour. In the latter class I include dreams which are characterised by some behaviour, such as muttering, groaning, smiling, sighing, etc. as also Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking. (iii) Next, I shall mention dreams whose content is partially determined by external stimulation of the sleeper's body. We have all heard of the dream that one is walking through snow and ice, which one has when on a cold night his blanket slips from his feet and they are exposed to cold. (iv) I shall mention, next, dreams in which some problem of waking life is solved, a mathematical problem or merely a search for a lost article. The solution comes to the dreamer in the dream in the form of a worked-out example on paper or he sees the lost article in a particular place in the dream and on waking finds there. Such dreams have been reported by reliable investigators. (v) Last of all may be mentioned the dreams which alone Malcolm is willing to recognise as dreams proper, viz. those in which there is total absence of behaviour on the part of the sleeper during the period in which dreaming is reported to have occurred. These are the dreams to which Malcolm's theory is intended to apply.

Before proceeding to comment on these various kinds of dreams I should like to make a comment on the last class of dreams.

How do we know that there are *any* such dreams ? It would have to be shown that a man's sleep was completely devoid of behaviour at least in some cases in which having woken up he reported a dream. Whether any sleeper was thus carefully watched for the slightest behaviour by Malcolm or by anyone else he does not say; and I rather think that he merely takes for granted that there are such dreams. I think it is quite possible that every dream, even the quietest, has some slight behavioural expression; and while it may not be possible to prove this, I do not see any inherent impossibility in it. Of course Malcolm's argument has been designed to prove that this is never possible; but that argument is to be examined in the sequel. I am just now speaking from the point of view of common sense.

Coming back to the kinds of dreams listed above, it is clear that the first four kinds of dreams do not conform to Malcolm's theory. In dreams of classes (i) and (ii) there is clear proof of mental activity during sleep, an activity which is the dream. It would be absurd to suggest that the person who is in the throes of a nightmare and is screaming and struggling in his bed is not undergoing some kind of a frightful experience. And usually this person after awaking from the nightmare reports a terrible dream. If conclusive evidence of mental activity in dream were required, that of nightmares would certainly seem to be enough. But Malcolm disposes of nightmares unceremoniously by roundly denying that they are dreams. "Those violent movements and sounds", he says, "and the appearance of mental agitation diverge too far from the criterion of behaviour for sleep". (p. 28) And again "His state was however so unlike the paradigms of normal sleep that it is at least problematic whether it should be said that he was 'asleep' when those struggles were going on" (pp. 62-63). So Malcolm's verdict on nightmares is that they don't take place in sleep and so are not dreams proper. A person undergoing a nightmare is partially awake ! If this is not a case of arbitrary stipulation, it would be difficult to find one !

I think there is a clear evidence of activity during sleep in dreams of class (iii) also. If it is true that the content of a dream is partially determined by external stimulation it can hardly be denied that such a dream contains mental activity. But, for that very reason, Malcolm would deny that the person was asleep, responding

to external stimuli being clear proof (he would say) of the person being partially awake. It seems to me nevertheless beyond doubt that the experience which such a person undergoes would be universally described as a dream. Malcolm's refusal to call it a dream is a case of redefinition in the interests of a theory.

Dreams belonging to class (iv) give further evidence of mental activity during sleep. Malcolm's refusal to grant mental activity here is bound up with his general refusal to grant mental activity in dreams. I shall, therefore, return to these dreams later.

It is then clear that Malcolm's theory is certainly not true of all dreams. Dreams belonging to classes (i) and (ii) have in addition to the waking report another criterion, viz. their behaviour in sleep. Normally these two criteria, viz. the report and the behaviour, mutually support each other. If a man who wakes from a violent nightmare reports a dreadful dream, we have a case of a dream which has both these criteria. Similarly, if a man, who shows some mild signs of mental activity during sleep, signs such as sighing, smiling, muttering the name of his sweetheart etc., reports on being woken up a dream which is in keeping with the behaviour, we have another case of a dream which satisfies both criteria. And it might be maintained that *all* dreams are of this kind. For how can we know that for every dream that is reported there was not in sleep some behaviour which agreed with the report ? I think that this is a real possibility and until we have refuted it we have no right to suppose that there are any dreams which have only one criterion, viz. the waking report, far less that all dreams are such. I think, therefore, that if it is granted, as I think it must be, that in some dreams at least there is mental activity in sleep, we have no right to suppose, without positive proof to the contrary, that this may not be true of all dreams. Indeed the principle of continuity would naturally incline us to believe that this is true of all dreams. This principle would suggest that dreams form a graded series, starting with nightmares at one end, passing through dreams in which there is less and less overt behaviour and ending with dreams in which there is no overt behaviour at all. In that case it would be arbitrary to hold that these last dreams form a totally different class and do not consist of mental activity in sleep. The more natural conclusion

would be that even in these dreams there is mental activity; only it is so slight that it has no overt expression.

Nevertheless, of these last dreams Malcolm could hold that in the absence of any evidence of overt behaviour we are left with only the after-sleep report and that, therefore, his theory applies to these dreams at least. Let us, therefore, see whether there is not evidence of mental activity other than behaviour.

III

The answer that naturally springs to the lips is, "Of course there is such evidence! Don't we *remember* dreams? Isn't memory of dreams evidence of mental activity during sleep?" But Malcolm says that the memory of a dream is not memory in the ordinary sense of the term. Ordinary memory requires an earlier experience which is recalled later, and the question of correspondence of memory with the original experience, i.e. the question of the truth or falsehood of memory, is significant. But in the case of a dream this question, Malcolm says, is meaningless. There is no question of a dream-report being faithful to the dream, because there is nothing beyond the waking impression to which the latter might or might not correspond. Malcolm quotes here the following passage from Wittgenstein. "The question whether the dreamer's memory deceives him when he reports the dream after waking cannot arise, unless indeed we introduce a completely new criterion for the report's 'agreeing' with the dream, a criterion which gives us a concept of 'truth' as distinct from 'truthfulness' here" (*Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 222-223). "When we think philosophically about memory", Malcolm goes on "the following sort of paradigm comes most naturally to our minds: I spoke certain words to you yesterday. Today I am requested to give an account of what those words were. The account I give is right or wrong. This is determined by whether it agree with your account and that of other witnesses, perhaps also by whether it is plausible in the light of what is known about you and me and the circumstances of yesterday, and perhaps by still other things. But when I speak of 'remembering' a dream there is nothing outside of my account of the dream to determine that my account is right or wrong. Since nothing counts as determining

that my memory of my dream is right or wrong, what sense can the word 'memory' have here?" (pp. 56-57). This argument is ingenious, but not, I am afraid, conclusive.

Why is the "memory" of a dream not remembering in the ordinary sense of the term? Because in ordinary memory (i.e. memory of events experienced during wakefulness) there is possibility of verification whereas in the case of memory of dreams there is no such possibility. Let us consider these two points in order. (i) What kind of verifiability has the memory of a waking experience? Malcolm's answer to this question is contained in the passage quoted above. As against it I want to maintain that in a sense there can be no verification for memory. Memory knowledge is ultimate in the sense that sense-experience can be admitted as evidence for or against it only if some other memory is called in to support it. Take the example given by Malcolm as the paradigm for memory. I spoke to you something yesterday and recall today what I said. This memory is verifiable, according to Malcolm. How? Because you or some other persons who were present yesterday corroborate it or testify against it. But this is merely depending upon *their* memory. Again I shall not accept their testimony unless I am able to *recall* with their help what I actually did say. Similarly with records of past experiences to which one might appeal in verification of a memory. The fact that I have made a note in my diary that I did or said or thought something yesterday would not prove that I did or said or thought that thing unless I (or somebody else) remember having made that note. It may be said that I might infer that I must have had that experience yesterday on the ground that I never make any but truthful entries in my diary; but how do I know that I never (or even usually do not) make untruthful entries in my diary unless I depend on my memory? In short even in the case of the memory of a wakeful experience there is no verification save through some other memory. Unless all evidence of sense-experience is accompanied by memory, by the "impression" that I had this, that and the other experience, there is no verification of a memory claim. Sense-experience by itself cannot confirm or confute a memory claim; it is only sense-experience backed by some memory that can verify it. Memory is thus ultimate and self-certifying and in a sense unverifiable. If the principle of

verifiability should declare memory to be meaningless on this ground, so much the worse, I would say, for the principle of verifiability !

The only difference, then, between the memory of a dream and that of a waking experience is that in the latter corroboration of one's memory by another person's is possible, whereas this is not possible in the case of dreams. But this may not be the peculiarity of the memory of dreams. Other people's memory can be appealed to in support or against one's memory only in cases where what is remembered is a *public* event. But suppose I now remember that I had a particular thought in the morning which I did not communicate to any one both because there was no one about and because I wanted to keep it to myself. Would it follow that this memory is not memory proper because it cannot be verified. Malcolm would say that being awake I *could* have spoken that thought to someone and so this memory is in theory verifiable. Consider the following case. Suppose that I am lost in some thought, so completely engrossed that I am almost "dead to the world". Suppose that after coming out of this state I recall a certain thought that came to me during that state. I had not spoken that thought to anyone, and it might be maintained that being completely engrossed in it I could not, even in theory, have expressed it to anybody else. Merely because this thought was not expressed and was not even expressible, would it follow that therefore my memory of that thought is not to be called a memory at all ? I am afraid this would be too arbitrary a proceeding.

Let us compare the phenomenology of the two rememberings. As far as one can see phenomenologically there is absolutely no difference between the two. Some details of the dream episode are remembered easily, others have to be recalled with some effort. Sometimes the report is altered in some respects. Effort brings back details which might otherwise have been lost. The experience is throughout that of careful scrutiny and faithful reporting. In both cases the scrutiny is retrospective; there is report of a dream only if retrospective attention reveals something, and the report tries to be faithful to that which is revealed. The fact that one sometimes wakes up with an impression of having dreamed and sometimes not is to Malcolm only a brute

fact, not requiring any explanation, nor implying anything beyond itself. But the fact certainly requires explanation, and the only explanation which seems both necessary and sufficient is that an experience did actually take place in sleep. Malcolm's rejoinder to this is that "an 'explanation' explains nothing if it involves an unintelligible hypothesis. Nothing can count for or against the truth of this hypothesis. We can say either that there were experiences during sleep or that there were not, as we like. Whichever assertion we care to make, it can play no part in the daily employment of the concept of dreaming. 'A wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism' (Wittgenstein, *P.I.*, 271)" (p. 86)

I have been trying to show that the hypothesis in question is not unintelligible, and I shall say something more in what follows. And if it not unintelligible, it could not be said to explain nothing, or to be a wheel which could be turned though nothing else turned with it.

I shall say here something about the waking "impression" which would ordinarily be thought to point backward to the dream experience, but which Malcolm regards as a brute fact, incapable of explanation and requiring none.

IV

Malcolm's strange theory of dreaming requires him to give a very unplaussible account of the relation between a dream and the waking impression of that dream. Malcolm is at pains to say that the two are not identical, and even goes so far as to say that they are identical would be self-contradictory. But if they are numerically different, how are they related? Malcolm's reply is that they are not logically independent in the sense that neither could exist regardless of whether the other existed. But if we accept Malcolm's theory it is difficult to see here *two* things which are numerically different. Since by dream we must not mean any occurrence which actually takes place during sleep what is there beyond the waking impression which is here being referred to as the dream and whose relation to the impression we are trying to investigate? "Dreams occur during sleep" must, on Malcolm's view, be a false proposition, for the simple reason that there are no such occurrences. And yet Malcolm

accepts this proposition as perfectly true. In the circumstances it is not easy to see how the numerical difference of the dream and the waking impression can be maintained. It seems to me that there being nothing beyond the impression, the two are identical. If this conclusion is self-contradictory, as Malcolm says it is (p. 59), it would be a very good reason for rejecting his whole bizarre analysis.

But let us waive this point and pass on to the next. Let us grant that a dream and its waking impression are two different things. How are they related? Malcolm says they are not logically independent; i.e. it is impossible that one should have impression of a dream without having dreamt or that one should dream and not have the impression or report it later. But I think both these phenomena actually take place, especially the latter. (i) It is possible for a man to wake up with an impression of having dreamt and so find out later that he did not dream it but actually experienced it. (ii) Secondly, it might happen that a dream is not recalled. This may be shown in the following way. It often happens that a dream is recalled not immediately on waking, but several hours later. It is perfectly meaningful to say that if this man had been killed in the meanwhile, there would have been no recall of it. And it is certain that many dreams are just forgotten and never recalled. We cannot, therefore, maintain with Malcolm that a dream and its waking impression are not logically independent.

V

Is it true there can be no consciousness in sleep? We have already seen that Malcolm so defines sleep that during it there can be no behavioural evidence of any thought going on in the sleeper's mind. But our ordinary concept of sleep is not so precise. By making it precise we might be able to draw exciting conclusions. But whether such arbitrary definitions and the drawing of sensational implications from them has any interest for sound philosophy may be doubted. If we attend to our actual concept of sleep we shall find that it is quite complicated, and not easily definable. Nor do I intend to attempt to define it here. I shall merely point out here that the idea of thought taking place in sleep is by no means ruled

out by our ordinary concept of sleep. And I shall cite, in support of my contention, two kinds of evidence : (i) selective responsiveness in sleep and (ii) dreams whose content is determined by external stimuli.

(i) It is a remarkable fact noted by psychologists that a sleeper while sound asleep and so unresponsive to normal stimuli can yet be readily roused from sleep by some comparatively slight stimulus. The whimpering of a child has this effect on the sleeping mother who is otherwise dead to the..... and similarly a doctor is said to be awakened by the first stroke of the clapper of his night-bell, while he is completely unresponsive to most other stimuli much more intense than these. This selective responsiveness is a clear indication of some kind of dim consciousness in sleep. Malcolm who refers to such examples in a slightly different context gives a different account of them. "It looks as if" he says, "the sleeper *heard* all of the sounds and *chose* to react to some but not to others. But this inclination is in error : the criteria for his having heard the other sounds—viz. his behaviour and testimony—are not satisfied. It is just a fact that a person who is sound asleep and therefore generally unaware of moderate noises and movements in his vicinity, can sometimes be wakened by some particularly slight noise such as the baby's whimpering" (p. 32). I am afraid, Malcolm's account of what this phenomenon looks like is somewhat strongly expressed. Those who think that this phenomenon indicates consciousness in sleep would not carelike to maintain that the sleeper *chooses* which sounds to react to. It would be enough to maintain that only some sounds rouse his interest. For this it is not necessary that he should have heard all the sounds well enough to have shown it in behaviour or to be able to testify. Similar phenomena are of common occurrence in waking life and there we do not insist on the criteria of behaviour and testimony to prove that there was selective attention and response. A man searching his friend in a crowd is not usually able to say who were all the persons over whom his eye roved till it came to rest on the person sought. He, nevertheless, sees all the people and passes them over till he comes upon his friend. For unless he saw a person he would not be able to decide that he was not the person sought. It would not be correct, therefore, to say that unless the

criteria of behaviour and testimony were satisfied we could not say that a person's response was selective. Unless he could distinguish between his friend and others he would not know whom to ignore and whom to fasten upon, and he could not distinguish without looking at the person who was before him. For similar reasons the sleeper also would have to be declared as distinguishing between the one stimulus which awakens him and the others to which he remains unresponsive. (ii) Secondly, dreams whose content is partially determined by external stimuli can be cited as evidence of consciousness during sleep. Examples of such dreams have already been given in another context. Malcolm would regard such a state of a sleeper as one of partial awakenedness. But this is a piece of arbitrary stipulation in the interest of a theory for which there is little justification.

Even the fact that a sleeper can be awakened from sleep by the use of strong stimuli, such as violent shaking, loud noises, pains, etc., can be cited as evidence of some kind of consciousness in sleep. If sleep were a state of complete lapse of consciousness a man could wake only when the cause of unconsciousness disappeared; just as a man who has been made unconscious by the administration of ether comes back to consciousness only when the effect of the ether wears off. But he cannot be awakened by violent or painful stimuli; and neither could a man in deep sleep be awakened by these means. That he responds to violent stimuli is proof that there is some degree of consciousness even in deep sleep. We might, therefore, say that sleep is a state in which the threshold of perception is considerably raised; not that there is perception in it at all. Following Malcolm's line of thought one would have to say that all sleep is a state of partial awakenedness—a conclusion whose absurdity requires no comment. ■