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Some Re-evaluations of Anthropological Discourse Around 1750¹

The dream, a major topic of European thought in the eighteenth century, was considered a work of the imagination. Philosophers, anthropologists and physicians interested in the function of the imagination used dreams to learn more about the fabrication of ideas and their mutual mental and physical influences. This article presents three theses:

- 1. I concentrate on the period around 1750 and suggest that more innovative results were achieved at this time than recent research has conceded. I thereby antedate the presumption that the boom in medical and anthropological discussion of dreams was the era around 1800 by asserting that important arguments and aspects were already more or less developed in the middle of the Eighteenth century.
- 2. Contrary to the model of *dream as a sleep of reason* I will demonstrate that on the contrary philosophers and anthropologists around 1750 considered dreams to be reasonable and comprehensible.
- 3. Even if we concede the models of negation and of deficiency (i.e. the absence of reason, absence of sensation and absence of consciousness) which bestride

the ongoing discussion regarding anthropological perspectives of dreams in the eighteenth century, I argue that anthropologists around 1750 did not disapprove of and reject dreams, rather they were keen to examine their origin, consistency and psycho-physical effects.

Manfred Engel and Peter-André Alt extensively analysed the theory and literature on dreams in the era of European Enlightenment and Romanticism, therefore I will begin with a brief introduction to and comment on the main findings of these two scholars. In a fundamental article of 1998, ² Engel heuristically distinguishes four discourses on dreams: i) a philosophical discourse, ii) a medical-physiological discourse, iii) a popular enlightenment discourse, and iv) an anthropological discourse in which he seems to be chiefly interested. He describes the first three discourses very briefly. The philosophical discourse uses an ontological argument in emphasizing the lack of truth in dreams. The medical-physiological discourse explains dreams as an effect of the movement of spiritus animales, animal spirits, which re-activate traces of memories of past ideas. In the discourse of popular enlightenment, the account of dreams is part of a wider critique of superstition. Here, Engel recognizes a shift from the accentuation of prophetical dreams to so called 'natural' dreams which arise from the inner nature of man. With regard to the anthropological discourse Engel finally stresses a theory of deficiency, that is the conviction that dreams either lack reason or consciousness or even sensual perception. Engel emphasizes that the anthropologists mainly analyse the blunders and slips of the dreamer in order to get insight into repressed emotions. Engel later discusses examples of dreams in literature from Richardson and Rousseau to Wieland and Schiller. He mobilises the whole Freudian

vocabulary (Freudian slips, defence mechanism of repression, access to the unconscious) although he asserts us that his intention is not to reduce the history of the Enlightenment theory on dreams to psychoanalytical terms.

Peter-André Alt agrees with Engel's assumption of the autonomy of literature, which he expounds in terms of Niklas Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation. Whereby he suggests that literature can develop more complex ideas about dreams. Alt, however, points out that only literature could display the semantics of dreams as well as a new conception of individuality.³ By presenting a résumé of philosophical theories of dreams in the Enlightenment, Alt constructs a progression from a model of negation to a more positive model of mental activity in dreaming. The model of negation – very similar to Engel's theory of deficiency though avoiding all its problematic psychoanalytical presuppositions⁴ – assumes either the absence of reason (he mentions Descartes, Malebranche, Wolff, Condillac), the absence of sensation (Locke) or the absence of consciousness (Hume). Alt's narrative incorporates the oppositional terms of reason versus unreasonableness, consciousness versus unconsciousness, activation of body and soul versus deactivation and consumption of 'Lebenssaft' (lifeblood) referring to Johann August Unzer. In reporting the results of psycho-medical research Alt accentuates the one-sided supposition of *influxus* psychicus or mental influence focussing on the theory of Johann George Sulzer.

Both Alt and Engel marginalize the physical aspects of dreaming.⁵ I agree with Engel and Alt that dreams were regarded as psychologically and physiologically influenced, that is, not as the product of supernatural or evil powers – as in the tradition of the *Dream Book* of Artemidor, which was influential until the early modern period. I,

however, feel it inappropriate to stress the aspect of negation or – in Engel's term – of deficiency in the anthropological models of dreams and dreaming around 1750. Engel and Alt downplay a significant positive emphasis in the anthropological texts, which on the one hand thoroughly investigate the impact of physical and mental factors on dreams as well as the origins of disordered and confused ideas while on the other hand neglecting the morally practical perspective on dreams that is given in the didactical stories of the *Moralischen Wochenschriften* (Moral Weeklies) between 1748 and 1761.

Considering the discussion on dreams around 1750 one can distinguish five perspectives:

- 1. With regard to the reproductive power of imagination, dreams are conceived of as a continuation of the thoughts and feelings of the preceding days. This continuation is presented in terms of order and reason. Dreams can be used to enhance individual self-knowledge and they can also be improved through the habitualization of ideas.
- With regard to the productive power of the imagination, dreams are also regarded as compensation for unsatisfied or repressed desires that arise in the normal course of everyday life.
- 3. The psychic activity is characterized by the metaphor of the soul as a puppet player.

- 4. Empiricist philosophers and contemporary medical scientists also concede that dreams may be influenced by bodily factors.
- The empiricist and sensualist view of dreams increases the value of inconsistent and confused ideas through investigation of the structure of dreams.

1. Dreams as a reasonable continuation of thoughts and feelings of the awake mind – 'Moralische Wochenschriften'

Dissenting from Alt's view, I argue that the German 'Moralische Wochenschriften' from 1748 to 1761 already give an account of dreams as a source of self-knowledge because they are seen to follow a reasonable order. Alt however holds that it was not until Diderot's *Le rêve d'Alembert* (1769) that dreams were recognized as following a reasonable order.⁶

The Moral Weekly *Der Mensch* (*The Man*) dealt with dreams as an object of popular philosophy. In volume ten from 1755 we find a very elaborate article on dreaming.

One paragraph sketches the pragmatic use of dreams:

The most reasonable and most striking interpretation of dreams consists in regarding dreams as symbols – not as symbols of prospective happy or unhappy contingencies but as symbols of our ethos [Gesinnung] and character. Therefore we have a duty to use our dreams as a source of self-knowledge.⁷

Furthermore, the article goes on to state that dreams sometimes appear as a 'clearer mirror of the self'. Since we are not distracted from new sensations we "think and act absolutely authentically". In these quotations we find a very innovative perspective that regards dreams as a reflection of someone's individual motives for action and their state of mind. We could call this the *individualisation* of dreams, in contrast to their traditional interpretation with the help of 'dream books', which was based on collective, timeless patterns of meaning. The addressing and questioning of dreams in order to improve self-knowledge implies that dreams are a continuation of the past or recent ideas and emotions of the individual dreamer.

In the same article, another use of dreams is pointed out which is worth keeping in mind. The author admonishes the readers to improve their imagination and their poetic faculty by dealing with good and morally appropriate things and affairs during the day. The following drastic warning reveals the morally pragmatic context of this idea: "When a man is thinking bad and sexual things all day long [...] and satisfying his sexual affects to a certain extent, in dreams he will emerge as a bigger bitch hunter or even the landlord of a bordello [my translation]."

This sentence is meant to repudiate the sexual content of dreams and furthermore to encourage the disciplining of dreaming on the basis of a continuous control of the imagination while awake. Although one might be reminded of Freud's theory of the *Über-Ich*, super-ego, which is activated in dreams, this warning is grounded in the aesthetic ideas of Georg Friedrich Meier. In his aesthetics of 1748 – which was based on a more empiricist interpretation of the Wolffian School of philosophy, he pleads for the improvement of the so called lower faculties of the soul like memory,

imagination, or attention. The imagination is divided into two aspects, a reproductive power on the one side, and a productive power on the other; the productive power is also called *Dichtungskraft*, poetic power. Meier promotes an absolutely controlled use of the poetic power based on the principles of sufficient causation and consistency. The same control of the imagination should be applied to dreams in adapting them to reasonable and moral limits. In this example – and I might add lots of others from the 'Moralische Wochenschriften' edited by the Wolffian scholars Meier and Samuel Gotthold Lange¹¹ – the improvement of self-knowledge means self-control based on reason and morality. Therefore I prefer to speak of a *model of habitualization of dreams*, through the habitualizing of the imagination as a productive faculty. In the empirical psychology of the late Enlightenment period we find a perhaps more radical postulation of the disciplining of dreams, for example in the psychic-sanitizing articles of Carl Friedrich Pockels in the *Magazin für Erfahrungs-Seelenkunde* (1783-1793) who suggested the keeping of a diary of the imaginary evidents in dreams. ¹²

2. Dreams as a compensation for unsatisfied/repressed desires in the normal course of life – 'Moralische Wochenschriften'

Although Engel argues that the theory of compensation of unsatisfied desires in dreams is first displayed in fictional texts, for example, Wieland's novel *Geschichte des Agathon* (1766/67) we already find it in the semi-fictional stories of the formerly mentioned 'Moralische Wochenschriften', but with another emphasis. In these writings, dreams were conceived of as not only a clearer mirror of the self, which has to be morally controlled. But, compensatory dreams are allowed if they balance a poor life, for example, a life without enough food. If someone has only water, bread and

poorly prepared vegetables he might imagine an opulent meal without having a crammed stomach afterwards.¹³ In this perspective, satisfaction of repressed desires in dreams is acceptable as long as it complies with the ideals of Bourgeois virtue, in this case temperance and frugality. Although the inconsistency in this argument is more than obvious – it is not applied to sexual desires – it may show that dreams were not only conceived of simply as a continuation of daily thoughts and activities but also as compensation for unsatisfied desires. This discrepancy perhaps reveals that the alleged possibility of habitualization of dreams is an *ex-post* rationalization while adapting dreams to reality, i.e. to the limits of reason and morality. It might be added that the abovementioned considerations regarding dreams are limited by the boundaries of moral pragmatic discourse.

3. The soul as a puppet player – Johann Gottlob Krüger

With regard to the continuation model of dreams we can observe that anthropological thinkers around 1750, like A. v. Haller or J. G. Krüger, assume that ideas in dreams are often consistent and ordered. Krüger states that ideas in dreams may continue the array of ideas that the dreamer had before falling asleep, for example solving mathematic problems or producing poetic verses in dreams. ¹⁴ Hence, contrary to the model of negation I would emphasize that dreams are also considered integrated parts of the entire soul, reasonable and deliberate. For Krüger, the association of ideas in dreams, even if it appears disordered in the dream itself, always has a sufficient reason. ¹⁵ For Haller the soul while dreaming is self-consciously drawing conclusions and making judgements. ¹⁶

At this point, I have to mention a remarkable metaphor that is used by two different anthropological thinkers, by Krüger as well as by Charles Bonnet.¹⁷ In dealing with the problem of disordered ideas in dreams Krüger discusses the role of the soul. He says:

In dreams the soul resembles a puppet player who moves his puppets. In doing so the soul does not know what it is doing while imagining itself as a spectator of a performance, which itself produces. But it would be good if the reason for this terrible error were detected, the error by which the soul considers its own creatures as alien products. ¹⁸

This quotation directs our attention to the pitfalls faced by the soul which is called on to be aware of everything it causes despite being incapable of so doing. Although we might attribute this assumption to the model of negation or absence it nevertheless opens a perspective onto a model of the soul that regards it as the creator of the ideas, which seem unconscious although they have a psychic origin. This assumption of Krüger's may lead us to a more positive model of mental activity in dreams which Alt ascribes to the influence of Johann George Sulzer's essay on *Consiousness and its Influence on Our Judgement*¹⁹ assuming that this scholar was the originator of this positive view on dreams.²⁰

Shifting the point of view to the empiricist anthropological theories regarding dreams of around 1750 I will now concentrate on the different explanations of disordered ideas in dreams. In using the term 'disordered ideas' I may appear to confirm the

model of negation and deficiency, however, I would suggest that the concession of disordered, confused ideas in dreams has been associated with a special attention, fascination, and detailed inquiry regarding the fabrication of ideas in terms of their bodily as well as their psychological aspects. But one should not blame the anthropologists (in the way Alt criticises them²¹) for their eagerness to analyse what they in fact reject in accepting the consequence of disenchantment regarding dreams. In conceding that ideas in dreams can be confused or irregular, anthropological orientated scholars exculpate them from the alternative of the true or untrue while emphasizing the proper order of ideas.

4. The physically influenced causation of dreams – A. v. Haller and J. G. Krüger Although most of the anthropological thinkers considered dreams as a consequence of preceding sensations – Engel considers them as the model of the "Tagesrest" (remains of the day) – they also describe the effects of spontaneous sensations while dreaming. This contradicts the opinion that the dreamer's sensations are also asleep.

Anthropologists pay much attention to the point of bodily caused sensations. In his *Physiology* of 1757 onwards, Albrecht von Haller sets out that dreams may be caused by hunger and thirst, fever and pains or by constrained blood circulation. ²²
Furthermore, he asserts, in agreement with Tissot, that the ejaculation of seminal fluid can cause erotic dreams. ²³ The same example is cited by the psychic-medical thinker Ernst Anton Nicolai who denounces the phenomenon as a consequence of too many sexual contacts. ²⁴ Besides this moral objection it is a striking idea that dreams may arise spontaneously and involuntary through physically influenced causation.

That thinkers like Haller, Krüger, and Meier, along with philosophers like Johann Heinrich Samuel Formey or Charles Bonnet make the body responsible for the characteristic confusion in dreams would seem to affirm the model of negation. We should remember Goya's *bonmot*: "the sleep of reason gives birth to monsters". Apart from this kind of demonisation however, we also find a rather detailed examination of bodily influences. In analysing dreams philosophers and medical scientists alike speak about conflicting orders of ideas, for example, when the dreamer had developed an array of ideas following the sensation of heat which contradicts a new array of ideas arising from the sensation of cold after their blanket drops from the bed. These kinds of dreams are conceived of as composed dreams.²⁵ The investigation of physical causation indicates that they may not only cause confused dreams or nightmares but also positive emotions. This explanation gives some insight into the connexion between the mind and body.

5. Re-evaluation of inconsistent dreams – David Hartley

At the centre of the writings on memory and imagination by empiricist philosophers is the theory of association, which deals with the order of ideas. David Hume stated three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity and causality. David Hartley, one of the main representatives of Associationism in eighteenth century, formulated a fresh, innovative perspective on dreams. Hartley was particularly interested in their disorder and inconsistency. In his *Observations on Man* of 1749, he outlines three psychophysical mechanisms that influence dreams: "First, The Impressions and Ideas lately received, and particularly those of the preceding Day. Secondly, The State of the Body, particularly of the Stomach and Brain. And, thirdly, Association."²⁶

Dealing with the problem of disorder, Hartley points out that the dreamer is indifferent to order or disorder because of the vividness of ideas in dreams: "The Scenes which present themselves are taken to be real. We do not consider them as the Work of the Fancy; but suppose ourselves present, and actually seeing and hearing what passes." Hartley moves on stating that inconsistency and wildness are consequences of the vivid and quick rise of ideas in dreams. For example, dreamers might experience the impression of being in two places at one time or of seeing one person simultaneously in different places.

Hartley also considers different stages of dreaming:

The Dreams which are represented in the first Part of the Night are, for the most part, much more confused, irregular, and difficult to be remembered, than those which we dream towards the Morning; and these last are often rational to a considerable Degree, and regulated according to the usual Course of our Association.²⁸

In describing the process of dreaming Hartley deploys the psychic-medical theory of vibrations, which is based in the Stahlian medical tradition.²⁹ Mind and nerves are active during the whole night. Dreams are triggered either by nearly imperceptible vibrations in the nerves or through the transfer of ideas in the brain.³⁰ If someone dreams, for example, the same pictures over and over again Hartley explains this physiologically as the "return of the same state of the brain".³¹ Hence, we forget

dreams quickly "because the state of the brain suffers great changes in passing from sleep to vigilance". Therefore, Hartley considers keeping the body in the same position after awakening might increase the chances of remembering a dream. Although we can find conflicting arguments in the empiricist and sensualistic tradition, for instance Condillac's quite critical statement on the failure of reason in dreams, Hartley gives dreams more validity while assuming that the dreamer is not able to differentiate the vivid, disordered ideas in dreams from real, reasonably ordered sensations. It is also worth emphasizing that in the period around 1750 there is a detailed investigation of origin and connexion of ideas in dreams and the possibility of their recollection.

To sum up, with regard to the above five points, the significance of anthropological thought concerning dreams as a part of human nature around 1750 is underestimated and deserves to be re-evaluated with regard to particular aspects. Anthropological writers of this period already regard dreams as a key to individual self-knowledge. They give practical advice on how to improve dreams through habitualizing the imagination while being awake. This can be seen as an extension of the grasp of rationality to the so-called 'dark regions' of the souls. They re-evaluate positively the 'unconscious' parts of the soul. They regard dreams as having the potential to compensate for unsatisfied desires if these are compatible with the ideals of Bourgeois virtue. From an empiricist perspective, the anthropologists investigate physical influences on emotions, and last but not least, they give a detailed examination of the origin, consistency and psycho-physical effects of dreams. This conference paper may provide the impulse for a more thorough investigation of these insights.

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² Manfred Engel, "Traumtheorie und literarische Träume im 18. Jahrhundert," *Scientia Poetica* 2 (1998): 97-128.

³ Peter André Alt, "Der Schlaf der Vernunft. Traum und Traumtheorie in der europäischen Aufklärung," *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert. Zeitschrift der Deutschen Gesellschaft zur Erforschung des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts* 25.1 (2001), 55-82. Peter André Alt, *Der Schlaf der Vernunft. Literatur und Traum in der Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (München: Beck, 2002).

⁴ Alt, "Schlaf der Vernunft", 56, footnote 1.

Salt focuses on La Mettrie and d'Holbach, Unzer, Platner, and Sulzer but marginalizes the crucial contemporary concepts of Johann Gottlob Krüger in his *Experimental-Seelenlehre* (Halle, Helmstäst: Hemmerde, 1756), of Haller, and Hartley which were re-evaluated in recent studies. See, for instance, Carsten Zelle (Ed.), *Vernünftige Ärzte. Hallesche Psychomediziner und die Anfänge der Anthropologie in der deutschsprachigen Frühaufklärung* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001); Tanja van Hoorn, *Entwurf einer Psychophysiologie des Menschen. Johann Gottlob Krügers*, *Grundriß eines neuen Lehrgebäudes der Artzneygelahrtheit'* (1745) (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2006).

1998), 285-307.

⁶ Alt, "Schlaf der Vernunft", 78-80.

⁷ Trans. G. D. The original text is: "Die vernünftige und sicherste Traumdeuterey besteht darin, daß man die Träume als Zeichen, nicht etwa unserer uns bevorstehenden glücklichen oder unglücklichen Zufälle, sondern als Zeichen unserer Gesinnung und ganzen Gemüthsbeschaffenheit betrachte. Daher denn [...] die Pflicht entsteht, vermöge welcher ein vernünftiger Mensch seine Träume als Mittel der Selbsterkenntnis zu gebrauchen verbunden ist". *Der Mensch. Eine Moralische Wochenschrift*, ed. by Samuel Gotthold Lange und Georg Friedrich Meier. [Halle 1751-1755], 10 Vols. (Reprint: Hildesheim: Olms, 1992), Vol. X, no. 395: Betrachtung von Träumen, nebst Traumliebs Schreiben, 202

⁸ Lange & Meier, Der Mensch, Vol. X, 203.

⁹ Trans. G. D. The original text is: "Ein Mensch, der des Tages über an lauter unkeusche Sachen denkt, und brünstig einer Frauensperson nachwiehert, und seine unkeusche Begierden aufs äusserste sättiget; [...] so wird er dadurch ein noch größerer Hurenjäger, und noch dazu mit dem Unterschied, daß er im Traum sein eigener Bordelwirth ist." (ibid., 200.)

¹⁰ Cf. Georg Friedrich Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, 3 Vol. (Halle: Hemmerde, 1748-1750). See also Gabriele Dürbeck, *Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung*. *Perspektiven der Philosophie, Anthropologie und Ästhetik um 1750* (Tübingen: Niemeyer,

¹¹ Dürbeck, Einbildungskraft und Aufklärung, 236-239.

¹² Cf. Alt, Der Schlaf der Vernunft (2002), 179 et seg.

¹³ Lange & Meier, *Der Mensch*, Vol. X, 207. *Der Glückselige. Eine Moralische Wochenschrift*, ed. by Samuel Gottlob Lange and Georg Friedrich Meier, 12 Vols. (Halle 1763-1768), Vol. IV (1764), no. 119, 244 et seq.

Johann Gottlob Krüger, Versuch einer Experimental-Seelenlehre (Halle: Hemmerde, 1756),
 § 60, 198.

¹⁵ Ibid., 210.

¹⁶ Albrecht von Haller, *Anfangsgründe der Phisiologie des menschlichen Körpers*, 8 Vols.

Translated by Johann Samuel Hallen (Berlin, Leipzig: Voß, 1759-1776), Vol. V, 1176 et seq.

¹⁷ Bonnet affirms the model of negation when he states that: "In dreams, the soul seems to be a single observer. [...] Without any doubt, this is the reason for the confusion which we perceive in most of our dreams." Here the soul seems to be divided into a conscious half and an unconscious half which are, however, mediated in one and the same arena of the self. The original text is: "Die Seele scheint bey den Träumen eine bloße Zuschauerin zu seyn [...]. Und das ist ohne Zweifel die Ursache der Unordnung, welche wir in den Ideen, woraus die meisten unsrer Träume bestehen, wahrnehmen." Charles Bonnet, *Analytischer Versuch über die Seelenkräfte [Orig. Kopenhagen 1760]*, 2 Vols. (Bremen, Leipzig: Cramer, 1770/71), 63, trans. G. D.

¹⁸ Trans. G. D. The original text is: "Die Seele ist also im Traume einer Marionettenspielerin ähnlich, die ihre eigene Puppen bewegt, und dieses thut sie, ohne zu wissen, was sie thut: indem sie sich einbildet die Zuschauerin eines Schauspiels zu seyn, davon sie die Werckmeisterin ist. [...] Nur wäre es sehr gut, [...] wenn man den Ursprung des entsetzlichen Irrthums entdecken könnte, welcher macht, daß sie ihre eigne Wercke für fremde Geschöpfe hält." Krüger, *Experimental-Seelenlehre*, § 59, 197.

¹⁹ Johann George Sulzer, Von dem Bewußtsein und seinem Einflusse in unsere Urtheile
[1764], in Sulzer, "Vermischte philosophische Schriften" (Leipzig, 1773), Vol. 1, 199-224.

²⁰ Alt, "Schlaf der Vernunft", 68 et seg.

²¹ Alt, Der Schlaf der Vernunft, 179.

²² Haller, Anfangsgründe der Phisiologie des menschlichen Körpers, Vol. V, 1177 et seq.

²³ Ibid., 1178.

²⁴ Ernst Anton Nicolai, Gedancken von den Würckungen der Einbildungskraft in den menschlichen Körper (Halle: Hemmerde, 1751), 167-170.

²⁵ Krüger, Versuch einer Experimental-Seelenlehre, § 60, 199; see also Bonnet, Analytischer Versuch über die Seelenkräfte, 101.

²⁶ David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 2 Vols. [London 1749] Reprint. Hildesheim: Olms, 1967), Vol. I, 384.

²⁷ Ibid., 384.

²⁸ Ibid., 388.

²⁹ Cf. Johanna Geyer-Kordesch, *Pietismus, Medizin und Aufklärung in Preußen im 18. Jahrhundert, das Leben und Werk Georg Ernst Stahls* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000)

³⁰ Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 386.

³¹ Ibid., 388.

³² Ibid., 388.

Bonnot de Condillac makes the completely opposite assumption in his *Traité des sensations* (1754). It is because dreams contradict our habitual judgements and astonish us that we remember them. Alt has pointed out that Condillac replaces the model of negation with a model of reduction with regard to the lower attention, i.e. lower activity of mind in dreams. Condillac assumes that only some of the acquired ideas continue in dreams so that the association of ideas is interrupted. Here, Alt disagrees, insisting that the non-causality does not represent an interruption of ideas but the absence of reason which fails to discipline the free flow of ideas. See Alt, "Schlaf der Vernunft", 64.