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The etheric place: Notes on finding the supernatural at the boundaries of sleep

Adam J. Powell & Christopher C. H. Cook

*Department of Theology & Religion, Durham University, Palace Green, Abbey House,
Durham DH1 3RS*

Adam.j.powell@durham.ac.uk / C.c.h.cook@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

Whilst conducting qualitative studies with both Christians who report hearing supernatural voices and Spiritualists who report 'clairaudience', we have encountered numerous instances of what appeared to be hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences being deemed spiritual by our participants. Taking place at the boundary between wakefulness and sleep, these occurrences involve voices, visions, and tactile phenomena. We note that they also seem to have common characteristics that may distinguish them from other reported spiritual or religious experiences: 1) Clear and external aurality when involving voices, 2) Ambiguous messages or initial meanings, and 3) Later attribution to a supernatural agent.

Keywords: spiritualism; clairaudience; hypnagogia; dreams; attribution

1. Introduction

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James observes that 'in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate responses are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favour of the same conclusion' (2004: 75). This comes shortly after he describes several cases of 'hallucinations' which, he suggests, illustrate humanity's tendency to experience 'a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence...more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses"' (ibid.: 61). With these observations, James partly precipitated an approach to the study of religious experience, sometimes called 'attribution theory', that highlights how anomalous sensory/perceptual experiences come to be cloaked in spiritual or religious significance. However, James' illustrative cases also have something contextually striking in common, which he does not note: each took place at night or in bed as the experiencer was either falling asleep or waking up.

First labelled 'hypnagogic hallucinations' by the French psychiatrist Alfred Maury in 1848, the various phenomena experienced as perceptually 'real' during the transition from wakefulness to sleep had already been noted by the theologian and religious visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg in the late 18th century (1998). For Swedenborg, this liminal state of consciousness was highlighted as particularly spiritually fecund, and he seems to have regarded its religious revelations highly. By contrast, James asserts

that these sorts of experiences only occasionally ‘connect...with the religious sphere’ (2004: 63). Either way, the relevant literature on hypnagogia, a category that includes both ‘hypnagogic’ (between waking and sleeping) as well as ‘hypnopompic’ (between sleeping and waking) hallucinations, is united by a common set of phenomena. These experiences include, for instance, seeing shadowy figures, seeing geometric floating shapes, feeling an emotionally-charged ‘presence’ in the room, feeling pressure on the chest, sleep paralysis, and several others (Mavromatis 2010: 14-52).

Perhaps no one has produced more research on the way in which the seeming objectivity of these experiences can lead to spiritual traditions or beliefs than David Hufford (1982; 2005). Hufford, arguing against the top-down notion of an individual’s cultural expectations causing spiritual or religious experiences, also implicitly counters Jean-Paul Sartre’s exposition of hypnagogic hallucinations as being only ‘quasi-observations’ because they have no connection to the physical environment and do not present as true perceptions (2004: 37). Instead, Hufford notes that it is precisely the profound sense of objective reality, or ‘inarticulate feelings of reality’ as James puts it, accompanying experiences of sleep paralysis and felt presences that has led to many cultures’ folklore concerning entities that visit and often attack individuals at night (1982). For Hufford, too, the spiritual attributions afforded these experiences – the beliefs and explanations of the ‘religious sphere’ – are only salient inasmuch as they accord with the phenomenology of the experiences.

It is worth noting, however, that Hufford’s relatively recent scholarship on sleep paralysis and folklore is important, at least in part, because hypnagogia has been relatively underexplored by mental health researchers, folklorists, and those interested in the study of religious experience. Indeed, as recently as 2009, psychologists established a new self-report measure for hypnagogia, noting that ‘we still know relatively little about the correlates of hypnagogic and hypnopompic experiences’ (Jones, et al. 2009: 30). Peter Schwenger, a literary theorist, believes that this scholarly lacuna is partly due to Maury’s influential attempt to locate hypnagogic hallucinations in the eye itself (thus taken to be a product of purely physiological forces) and Sartre’s subsequent downplaying of sense perception and emphasis on ‘abnormal’ attentional consciousness upon relaxing our muscles in preparation for sleep (Schwenger 2012: 6; Sartre 2004: 40-42). Yet, the considerable lack of research into the potential connections between hypnagogic hallucinations and religious or spiritual experiences may also stem from the very source material informing James’ work in this area. The Census on Hallucinations originally conducted in Britain by the Society for Psychical Research, and subsequently executed in the United States during the early 1890s by James and others, explicitly sought to investigate hallucinations reported by a non-clinical population, excluding dreams and focusing primarily on hallucinations entailing deceased persons (James 1986: 56-78). The results of this survey were influential on both sides of the Atlantic, but it seems likely that the method of eliminating responses related to dreams and/or unrelated to deceased individuals would have effectively removed cases of hypnagogic hallucinations from the study. What is more, the turn of the 20th century also witnessed a concomitant blossoming of psychoanalysis in Europe, with leading figures like Freud and Jung famously claiming dreams as an important realm of the unconscious. For his part, Jung was interested in the paranormal and spiritual, blurring the line between the unconscious and the spiritual and even recording several cases of extraordinary hypnagogic hallucinations in his writings on ‘occult phenomena’ (1997: 49-53, 65-66).

Even so, and whilst acknowledging that at least one of these cases was reported by a spiritualist medium, Jung did not attempt to connect the emotional potency of the experiences with any spiritual or religious attribution.

Although recent evidence suggests that a number of historical religious experiences may have hypnagogia at their core (Powell 2018), the legacy left by the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams along with early psychical research's corresponding disregard of the same, plus perhaps Maury's or Sartre's influential arguments concerning the physiology of hypnagogia specifically, has resulted in a relative dearth of scholarship on this liminal state of consciousness and its interface with the spiritual. In fact, we, like James, only inadvertently encountered this connection during our recent research at Durham University as part of the Hearing the Voice project, an eight-year interdisciplinary study of auditory verbal hallucinations funded by the Wellcome Trust. Below are our preliminary observations from the field, noting common phenomenological and attributional patterns for those reporting spiritually significant experiences occurring at the boundaries of sleep. Ultimately, the necessary contexts and frequencies with which such attributions are made may require further focused research. Then again, perhaps James is correct that such an experience only '*occasionally* connects itself with the religious sphere' (emphasis added) (2004: 63).

2. Investigation: Method and 'Fieldwork'

Hearing the Voice is an interdisciplinary study of auditory hallucinations which began in 2012. In an attempt to clarify the similarities and differences – phenomenologically, contextually, socio-culturally, and emotionally – between the sorts of hallucination-like experiences reported by those seeking clinical psychiatric treatment and those not seeking treatment, our research team devised several online surveys as well as a semi-structured interview scheme intended to capture the subjective experience of hearing a voice in the absence of a speaker. Based on an initial survey of self-selected voice hearers (clinical and non-clinical, whether religious or not) that investigated the common traits, voice characteristics and circumstances associated with auditory verbal hallucinations (Woods, et al. 2015), we¹ designed several focused studies of similar phenomena among specific population groups and religious communities. Three of these studies provided the data discussed below: 1) A phenomenological questionnaire completed by Christians (N = 58) who report having heard spiritually significant voices at least once (Authors [submitted for publication]), 2) A comparable online questionnaire completed by Spiritualist mediums (N = 65) who report 'clairaudience' (Author 2020), and 3) Phenomenological interviews conducted with Spiritualist mediums (N = 27) associated with the Spiritualist National Union, all of whom also report 'clairaudience'. The free-text questions posed to our participants in the online surveys and the questions asked during in-person interviews are formulated to elicit qualitative responses describing, in as much detail as possible, the individual's hallucination-like experiences.

3. Notes and Observations

¹ In addition to the authors, 'we' refers here to Angela Woods, Ben Alderson-Day, and Peter Moseley, all of whom contributed to survey design, interviewing, and other aspects of data gathering and analysis in the studies of Christian and Spiritualist voice hearers discussed below.

Whilst we focus primarily on auditory experiences, several questions ask about other modalities (visual, tactile, etc.) or other accompanying emotions and sensations. What is more, we give the participants opportunities to tell us more generally about their 'first spiritual experience' or other important experiences 'not covered in the questionnaire'. We have noted responses including seemingly hypnagogic language in response to any and all of the above sets of questions.

For example, in describing their first 'spiritual experience' one of our Spiritualist participants recalled seeing geometric lights above them: 'I awoke one night to see two square shaped lights on the wall above my headboard, I lifted my hand to see if the lights would go on my hand, but I noticed that as I lifted my hand it didn't cast a shadow or block any outside light source, the squares remained solid in shape? I then realised there was a luminescence about the squares, I blinked my eyes and they were gone.' Another Spiritualist, when asked to tell us about their first 'clairaudient' experience, explicitly used the language of hypnagogia and sleep disturbances: 'During a sleep paralysis episode...I was fully conscious but unable to move and breathe, someone was talking to me in my left ear.' Similarly, one Spiritualist we interviewed related both auditory and visual experiences, with the latter being 'just like watching television' and occurring when they are 'on the verge of being awake and asleep.'

If these participants are, in fact, relating otherwise ordinary instances of hypnagogia, they may be taken as particularly clear examples of mundane events subsequently receiving sacred interpretations. Embedded in lengthy qualitative responses replete with sometimes vague and idiosyncratic language, the consistent and comparable accounts of apparent hypnagogia have begun to stand out. In our view they seem not only to describe the nocturnal settings and sensory phenomena typical of hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations (including felt presences, bright lights, paralysis, and floating shapes), but they also appear to constitute a pattern of qualities which may distinguish them from other forms of spiritual experience.

3.1 Aurality

First, with our focus on voice hearing it is no surprise that we ask many questions about the aurality of that which is heard. For instance, in both the questionnaires and the interviews, we ask for details concerning the extent to which the voices seem to originate internally or externally to the individual. We also question the degree to which the voices are 'heard' as one hears a speaker in the room, or whether the voice is experienced more like one's own thoughts. Whilst there is variation between the groups – our Christian participants, for example, seem somewhat more likely to hear things as truly auditory (as opposed to thought-like) than other groups – the apparent hypnagogic experiences seem to be experienced as clear and auditory, and nearly always external.

One of the Christian participants, for example, wrote that one of their two spiritual voice hearing experiences occurred one night when they were 'not asleep and not awake' and a 'distinct and clear' voice spoke one word in Hebrew. Another reported going to bed one night 'in absolute exhaustion' when, 'slipping from consciousness to sleep', a 'clear voice' said, 'As long as you keep on loving, you will never be alone.' Even more strikingly, a practicing Spiritualist medium told of a recurring experience in which they 'occasionally hear words or complete sentences outside [their] ears, as if a living

person were speaking... This happens most frequently when I am sleeping or about to awaken.' Participants in both groups also recalled hearing 'conversations' take place between two external speakers just as they were drifting off to sleep. Perhaps reflecting the norms of their trinitarian religious tradition in which the presence of two speakers would be highly unusual, the Christian participant who reported this experience identified it as 'physiological' and of no spiritual significance. In contrast, the corresponding Spiritualists cited the nocturnal conversations as valid instances of spiritual communication, one even finding the dialogical voices 'soothing'. Of all participants (Christians and Spiritualists) who described spiritually significant voice experiences occurring at the transition between wakefulness and sleep, we have only documented one who identified the speaker as their own 'deeper self'. Even then, the participant seems to describe a clear and audible experience.

3.2 Ambiguity

Interestingly, the content and significance of such voices – indeed of any reported hypnagogic spiritual experiences – is often described as initially ambiguous or even incoherent. A Spiritualist explained that, in one instance, they awoke to a 'huge sound' that sounded 'like the whole street could have been calling'; yet, the sound only spoke two words which 'meant nothing whatsoever.' This is certainly the case for those who experience visual phenomena, such as felt presences or bright lights, the spiritual significance of which may elude understanding. For two of our participants, both currently professional mediums, the ambiguity of the physical and visual phenomena they experienced was related to us in the context of their own efforts to 'develop' the skills of mediumship. For example, one of these two participants stated, 'Sometimes when falling asleep I would see white light and think someone had switched the light on but when I opened my eyes it was pitch black. However, I am developing well...'

As would be expected, auditory verbal experiences naturally present the opportunity for the experiencer to receive a meaningful message. However, it appears that in many cases the experience is somewhat banal or difficult to comprehend immediately. The participant who heard a single Hebrew term told us that they did not know Hebrew at the time. Another, who spoke of hearing a voice tell them, 'As long as you keep on loving you will never be alone', recalled having 'no idea what it meant' at the time. Similarly, one participant awoke from an afternoon nap to the sound of a voice saying 'Gulag'. In recounting the event, the participant claimed to have 'had no idea why [they] were hearing this.' Several participants also recalled hearing their name called (one of the most common hypnagogic hallucinations), and one simply heard the word 'mum'. In these cases, and despite the events being cited as examples of spiritual experiences, there seems to have been no specific meaning attributed to the words or phrases heard.

3.3 Attribution

That being said, ambiguity and attribution are markedly intertwined for both our Christian and Spiritualist respondents. For example, one Anglican Christian minister mentioned two separate occasions in which they heard a voice just after getting into bed. The voice was 'clear' and 'just behind the ear', so clear and external in one of the instances that this participant turned to their spouse and said, 'What did you say?' Despite the voice communicating quite encouraging messages ('You're going to marry [them], you know?' and 'You are the one I have ordained'), it 'was a long time before [they] realised it was God's voice speaking.' Indeed, this has been a somewhat

common refrain. The voices and visions of the hypnagogic state seem to leave the experiencer struck by the event but unsure how to proceed. Much as Hufford's work would predict, our participants frequently demonstrate a sort of meaning-making process wherein they attempt to locate or to align supernatural possibilities with the nature and emotional impact of their profound hypnagogic experiences.

In this regard, our two participant groups appear to differ slightly. For the Christians, attributing the hypnagogic experience to God seems to rely primarily on a process of discerning comfort or peace. Several report not knowing what the message they heard meant, but recognising it was divine because they subsequently slept more soundly than usual. One individual noted that their experience of a 'presence' in the room brought with it a 'growing sense' of 'warmth'. In comparison, the Spiritualists – with perhaps a broader and more inclusive sense of the imminence of the spiritual realm – appear to interpret even vague sensory or perceptual anomalies as moments of encounter with spirit beings and confirmation of their 'mediumistic' abilities. Within the Spiritualist frame, then, hearing one's name when falling asleep is later taken to be evidence of a spirit trying to communicate. Accordingly, recurring but otherwise ambiguous experiences, such as one interviewee's experience of seeing a column of light in their room on several consecutive nights, is understood as an emerging ability to connect with the spiritual.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Based on currently accepted understandings of hypnagogia (Jones, et al. 2009: 30), we estimate that 8 (14%) of our Christian participants, 11 (17%) of the respondents to our Spiritualist survey, and 9 (33%) of our Spiritualist interviewees report spiritually significant experiences which also fit the definition of hypnagogic or hypnopompic hallucinations. Each sample also includes several more who are likely describing hypnagogia but whose language leaves more room for doubt. When one considers that the prevalence of hypnagogia in the general population has been estimated as anywhere from approximately 31% (Ohayon 2000) to 85% (Jones, et al. 2009), our participants do not seem any more prone to reporting such experiences than anyone else. To the contrary, what may be more interesting is that we are finding many examples of this rather common experience being ascribed to spiritual agents or forces, a striking illustration of bottom-up and attributional theories of religious experience.

However, our observations may be somewhat circular. Hypnagogic hallucinations are partly characterised by clear external phenomena and heightened emotions; to highlight the clear aurality or subsequent attempts to explain spiritual experiences that occur in this liminal period of consciousness may be to state the obvious or expected. Even so we did not expect to encounter hypnagogia in our research and believe it is noteworthy. For instance, for those interested in the study of religious experiences, this subset (hypnagogic/hypnopompic spiritual experiences) may provide clear support for attributional theories. The theophanic or revelatory experiences occurring at the boundaries of sleep may not require either pre-existing beliefs/expectations, divine intervention, or the psychological exceptionality (high hypnotisability, high suggestibility, epilepsy, etc.) sometimes posited by theorists in this field. Furthermore, this subset has been included alongside all other hallucinatory phenomena by mental health researchers seeking to compare 'clinical' and 'non-clinical' voice hearers without recognising the qualia and contextual circumstances unique to hypnagogia.

Our findings may indicate that additional attention ought to be paid to hypnagogia's role in the religious experiences used for comparison with clinical forms of hallucinatory experience, as characteristics like the aurality and frequency of hallucinations depend greatly on participants' appraisals of the significance of these relatively common nocturnal events. After all, as one of our interviewees confirmed, 'A lot of people sort of either before going into sleep or waking up in the morning can be in a slightly more etheric place...you might want to look into that.'

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