

Descartes' Dreaming Argument And Why We Might Be Sceptical Of It

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The sceptical argument about dreaming that Descartes puts forward in the First Meditation is a landmark in philosophy. It raises a problem that seems to be both of the utmost simplicity and to be devastating in its impact on our claims to know things about the world around us. In a single paragraph Descartes describes how our confidence that we are awake may be shaken:

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.¹

Our concern here is to make clear what exactly the argument in this paragraph presupposes and what it purports to show. I shall also suggest a way in which we might avoid the sceptical conclusions that seem to arise so irresistibly from the thought that one might, at any given moment, be dreaming.

I

To begin with we must see the dreaming argument in the context of the *Meditations* themselves. They are an unconventional philosophical text. Most strikingly, they are written in the first person, recording the reflections of a solitary thinker. But the *Meditations* are not autobiography: we know that Descartes himself did not literally go through the process described in arriving at his philosophical views. We are really dealing with a piece of fiction, and the narrator, the 'I' of the *Meditations*, is a fictional character. He introduces himself in the sketchiest of terms as a person of a reasonably mature age who is concerned with making progress in science. We also know that the meditator finds himself in retirement from the world and thus able to devote himself to a concentrated period of meditation. Beyond that, we know precious little. This paucity of detail is no accident. Descartes wants the 'I' of the *Meditations* to stand for *any* thinker setting out in a quest for certainty: the *Meditations* represents an unfolding viewpoint that we are all invited to share. For this to be possible we must be able to fully identify with the narrator and that means the fewer distinguishing features the better.

It is because the narrator is a kind of philosophical everyman, that Descartes has him dismiss the possibility that he is undergoing delusions similar to those in the insane when the thought suggests itself:

Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.²

Few readers would be able to identify with a narrator who thought he might be insane. So, in the prosecution of his method of doubt, Descartes prefers to look to another consideration, the possibility that he is dreaming. Dreams serve Descartes' purposes well because they have the following double-aspect: they are on the one hand experiences of the ordinary, healthy mind, experiences with which no one could plausibly deny an acquaintance, and yet, on the other hand, they are comparable, in their extravagance and deceptiveness, to the delusions of insanity the narrator has just been considering.³

The key move that Descartes then makes is to highlight the lack of insight one has into one's condition when dreaming. It is this lack of insight, and Descartes' way of interpreting it, which forms the backbone of the dreaming argument. Descartes treats the lack of insight as the result of sense-perception and dreams having—or potentially having—the same content.

... I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.

The very situation in which the narrator finds himself right now, sitting by the fire in a dressing-gown with a piece of paper in his hand, might really be a scene in a dream he is having while fast asleep in bed. This in turn means that the meditator can no longer be sure of the existence of the things that he is perceiving, and thus he has a reason for a more general doubt about the overall veracity of his sense experience. The argument and conclusion are retrospectively summed up by the narrator in the Sixth Meditation thus:

... every thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep; and since I do not believe that what I seem to perceive in sleep comes from things located outside me, I did not see why I should be any more inclined to believe this of what I think I perceive while awake.

II

Let us return to the premise that there are 'no sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep'. This premise has been repeatedly challenged in the long history of responses to Descartes' sceptical thought. I shall now describe three such challenges: those of Hobbes, Locke and Austin.

Thomas Hobbes thought that one distinguishing mark of dreams was the absence of a sense of the absurd. In dreaming, he claimed, we take in all kinds of bizarre happenings without batting an eyelid. It does not occur to us that what we are experiencing is so crazy that it can only be an illusion. In waking life, on the other hand, our sense of the absurd is perfectly alive and so, looking back, we readily appreciate the absurdity of what we have dreamt. Hobbes can thus conclude that

... because waking I often observe the absurdity of Dreames, but never dream of the absurdities of my waking Thoughts; I am well satisfied, that being awake, I know I dreame not; though when I dreame, I think my selfe awake.⁴

Hobbes' view of dreams and waking involves an interesting asymmetry. Even if we do not know when we are dreaming that we are indeed dreaming, we may still know when we are awake that we are awake.

John Locke in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* is less patient with the suggestion that he might be dreaming. But he does offer some reasons for his impatience, inviting his opponent 'to dream that I make him this Answer'. The central mark that distinguishes dreams from waking experience in Locke's view is the pleasure and pain experienced when awake but not found in dreams. His point is best made with acute pain:

I believe he [someone like Descartes] will allow a very manifest difference between dreaming of being in the Fire, and being actually in it.⁵

It is important to emphasise that Locke's example is one of *physical* pain, as nightmares involving *mental* pain, such as anxiety, shame or fear, are commonplace. Locke is saying that the actual physical sensation of pain, at least in its more extreme forms, is not something that we could have when asleep and dreaming.

John Austin's mark of distinction is much less specific than either Hobbes' or Locke's, but he takes it to be equally destructive of the sceptical possibility:

I may have the experience ... of dreaming that I am being presented to the Pope. Could it be seriously suggested that having this dream is 'qualitatively indistinguishable' from *actually being* presented to the Pope? Quite obviously not. After all, we have the phrase 'a dream-like quality'; some waking experiences are said to have this dream-like quality, and some artists and writers occasionally try to impart it, usually with scant success to their works... If dreams were not 'qualitatively' different from waking experiences, then *every* waking experience would be like a dream; the dream-like quality would be, not difficult to capture, but impossible to avoid.⁶

Austin, you will notice, is careful to stop short of specifying what 'the dream-like quality' is. But he is convinced that there is such a quality, or atmosphere, because we recognise that the phrase 'a dream-like quality' itself is perfectly meaningful and we can indeed apply it to some (rare) works of art.

So we have three suggestions of what content might distinguish dreams from waking experience. The lack of a sense of absurdity (Hobbes), the physical sensation of pain (Locke), and an intangible but detectable atmosphere that somehow pervades a dream and is absent from waking experience (Austin). How would the meditator respond to these three suggestions?

His response would, almost certainly, be the same to each. He would contest the *impossibility* of dreams involving a sense of absurdity or pain or lacking the dream-like atmosphere. He would argue that just because we may not yet have experienced dreams with such contents, it does not mean that we *cannot* do so at any time. How can we not be sure that this is not our first dream bringing with it, say, a searing pain?

The strategy of response then is to appeal to a *potential* dream that might mimic our present experience, whatever that experience is. This is, in fact, an extraordinary potential to presuppose. It means that dreams are Protean, having a limitless ability to shape themselves into any waking situation. Perhaps we should call this the philosopher's concept of a dream: a capacity to replicate *any* scenario, feeling or thought. Armed with this concept, Descartes' narrator is able to fend off all challengers to the sceptical argument.

There is another aspect of Descartes' concept of dreaming that should be noticed. Descartes thinks that there is a part of our mind that is not affected by dreaming. One cognitive capacity, or group of capacities, can be trusted, even when one is dreaming:

... whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.⁷

The meditator cannot imagine himself to be deceived when reflecting on these truths which include the most straightforward statements in 'arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind'. The intellect maintains its ability to discern transparent truths even when caught up in a dream and, as we shall see, this makes possible the metaphysical reflections of the following meditations.

III

We have outlined two aspects of Descartes' concept of dream. Firstly its inexhaustible potential to mimic reality and secondly its failure to affect the clearest thoughts of the intellect. When we put these two things together we can characterise the concept of dreaming that Descartes presupposes in the *Meditations*. Most importantly, a dream for Descartes is a matter solely of the imagination. Because the imagination is treated as having the same characteristics and limits as sense-experience, the two are potentially indistinguishable.

If intellectual abilities can be contaminated by dreaming, that is presumably only because they involve imagery or memory, as when the complexity of the subject-matter demands that we faithfully remember a sequence of steps: the intellect when concentrating on one thing—a so-called 'simple nature'—cannot fail to be correct in its judgement.

Once we appreciate how Descartes treats dreams as concerns of the imagination alone we may also appreciate why the narrator, despite the initial shock he feels, brought on by his discovery, is ultimately so unfazed by the dreaming argument itself. After all, the narrator produces his proof of why he is not dreaming only in the final paragraph of the book. And more than once before then the narrator tells us that the hypothesis is unthreatening to his philosophical progress. At the end of the Fifth Meditation, for example, when he has convinced himself by deductive proof that God exists and that everything else depends upon his existence, the narrator poses the question of whether he is not dreaming the proof and the conclusion:

Can one raise the objection I put to myself a while ago, that I may be dreaming, or that everything which I am now thinking has as little truth as what comes to the mind of one who is asleep? Yet even this does not change anything. For even though I might be dreaming, if there is anything which is evident to my intellect then it is wholly true.⁸

Thus the intellectual progress of the *Meditations* is assumed to be sound, even if the meditator is fast asleep. This is an important point. It means that dreams are not states of the whole subject. The subject can remain lucid if he or she ignores the deliverances of sense-perception/ imagination. It also reveals Descartes' thinking about the lack of insight in a dream. The subject has no insight not because he or she is thoroughly confused or because the ability to reflect is incapacitated, but because the data coming from the senses and the imagination are indistinguishable: the dream appears to be just like sense-perception.

IV

Now that we have discerned the features of the concept of dreaming presupposed in the *Meditations* we can, I hope, begin to see the distance between this concept and our nightly experience of the dream-world. It was precisely because dreaming is an experience that everyone is familiar with that Descartes employed it in the meditator's sceptical strategy. The hope was that there is a natural conception of dreaming in common life, the implications of which can be exploited to bring our most basic perceptions into doubt. But in the course of the argument we have found that the conception of dreaming appealed to is not quite uncontroversial. For the argument to go through as Descartes would like it to, dreaming must involve an inexhaustible capacity of the imagination to mimic experience of reality, on the one hand, but no power to upset the basic functions of the intellect in mathematics and logic, and in philosophical reflection, on the other hand.⁹

But to systematically challenge the conception of dreaming that Descartes presupposes is not at all easy. When we seek a characterisation of what dreaming is we are thrown back on our own radically subjective experience. Dreams are supremely elusive. There are real problems, for example, with the reliability of memory. Memory of experiences in waking life can be confirmed by the memory of others and by the current state of physical things. I can be sure that I fed the cat, for example, because my wife remembers that I did so and because right now the cat is lying next to me purring, not begging for food. But can I be sure I had a dream in which I fed the cat? There is no way of checking whether my memory of doing so is

not just an illusion. Might it not, for example, have appeared in my mind on waking?¹⁰

The problems with memory are compounded by the fact that dreams have a peculiar phenomenology which is often almost impossible to put into words. When reflecting on dreams we are always in danger of reconstructing them in terms of the everyday perception of objects and people.

Their strangeness and otherness is perhaps impossible to capture. What is garbled and chaotic in the dream-world is translated into the clear and tidy terms of everyday experience. It is not even clear that the narrative structure we tell dreams in was really always there in the first place.

But the assumptions that Descartes makes about dreaming may at least be compared to what people can remember and relate of their actual dreams. Let us begin with the second assumption, the one that treats dreams as not affecting the reliability of the most transparent truths known to the intellect. This is a bold claim that was picked up on by Father Bourdin, author of the Seventh Objections to the *Meditations*, who gives us a very believable episode from a dream in which even the dreamer's ability to count is scrambled:

I know a man who once, when falling asleep, heard the clock strike four, and counted the strokes as 'one, one, one, one'. It then seemed to him that there was something absurd about this, and he shouted out: 'That clock must be going mad; it has struck one o'clock four times!' Is there really anything so absurd or irrational that it could not come into the mind of someone who is asleep or raving?¹¹

Bourdin here, by appealing to his friend's dream, seems ready to treat dreams as states of the whole subject. Dreams are not restricted to the image-making capacities of the imagination. They have the potential to distort all our thinking and thus deprive us of any ability to follow the dictates of rationality. Bourdin compares dreams to 'raving'—presumably states of delirium—say in fever.

We might also compare them to various forms of intoxication which have a similar general reach, confusing our mental capacities right across the board, including the intellect (in Descartes' sense). A very drunk person, for example, might not be trusted in counting even the smallest numbers (especially if he is seeing double). Dreams, then, like raving and drunkenness, are best treated as states of the whole subject.

More important though for the dreaming argument is the first assumption we mentioned, the one that grants dreams the potential to replicate any experience that we might have when waking. Descartes seems to assume that if a perceptual situation is not actually logically impossible—if it respects the principle of non-contradiction—then it may be dreamt. Now clearly there is a lot that is weird and wonderful in the world of dreams. The versatility of the imagination here is hard to put any sort of limit on. What is less clear, though, is whether dreams ever replicate certain kinds of *everyday* experiences. Take Descartes own example:

How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events—that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire— when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!

This exclamation is, on reflection, a peculiar one. Do we really dream that we are doing such familiar things as sitting by the fire writing? Do we really have such unextraordinary and, well, boring dreams? Many people who have examined dreaming itself, rather than the putative sceptical implications of dreaming, would say no. Here we will take one example, Havelock Ellis, a psychologist of the early twentieth century, who spent twenty years studying his own dreams, writing them down 'directly they have occurred, usually on awakening in the morning'. For Ellis 'the most elementary fact about dream vision is the perpetual and unceasing change which it is undergoing at every moment'. He used the term 'kaleidoscopic' for this quality of dreams. He believed that our freshest memories of dreams reveal their kaleidoscopic character, unlike the stylised stories that we subsequently construct when telling a dream.¹²

Would such kaleidoscopic experiences be able to replicate the situation that Descartes' narrator finds himself in? Hardly. The narrator is sitting by the fire in a dressing gown, holding a piece of paper in his hand. The situation is a static one, it involves perception of persisting physical objects, and those objects remain as they are even under careful examination. This experience is as far from being kaleidoscopic as any experience could be and therefore it contradicts what is, in Ellis' view, 'the most elementary fact about dream vision'. In addition there is concentrated reflection taking place and this requires a parallel steadiness at the conceptual level. To think about dreaming at all, for example, requires a continuing grasp of what a dream is.

If Ellis is fundamentally on the right lines in his empirical description of dreams, then dreams involve confused thinking, which is constantly evolving and changing in curious ways. They are fluid and unstable. They do not present such everyday experiences as sitting calmly by the fire and surveying one's surroundings in a state of reflection. Therefore the contents of dreams are indeed different to waking states and there *is* a sure sign that can distinguish the waking state from dreaming.

It might now seem that we are now putting forward a new suggestion in the spirit of Hobbes, Locke and Austin. But there is a difference. In the view of those three philosophers, there is a difference in the content of dreams and waking experience. This different content can be sought and when found treated as a sure sign that one is asleep or awake. The present suggestion goes further. It says that not only are the contents of dreams and waking life different, but that the subject is unable to appreciate this difference in his dreaming state. The subject has no unconfused faculty that might detect the difference. In other words, dreams and waking life are distinguishable in content, but the subject in a dream is not in a state to distinguish them.

Why does the subject lack insight into his dreaming condition? Not because dreams and waking experience have the same content, as Descartes thought, but precisely because of the distinguishing feature of the dreamlike state, its kaleidoscopic character, precludes insight. If the contents of dreams are always evolving and

changing there is no room for ordered rational reflection, including the reflection that would provide insight into the fact that one is at present dreaming.¹³ This also explains why, *contra* Descartes, dreams are typically states of the *whole* subject, affecting and confusing our ability to use the intellect in maths and logic and to reflect philosophically.

Let us return to Descartes' meditator. You will remember that he quickly became convinced that he could be dreaming because he treated the lack of insight in dreams as being the result of the lack of sure signs to distinguish dreams from reality. In other words the lack of insight was supposed to be the result of the contents of dreams and waking experience being (potentially at least) indistinguishable. We, on the other hand, are saying that the lack of insight is a result of the very *difference* in content between dreams and waking experience. Dreams are a flow of constantly shifting and transient impressions. Such a content cripples one's capacity for reflection on one's current state and therefore one experiences dreams without the knowledge that one is dreaming. We are therefore left agreeing with the asymmetry of insight pointed to by Hobbes'. The fact that I am not aware I am dreaming during a dream does not mean that now, in my reflective state, I may not be aware I am awake.

We have made a case for one way in which Descartes' sweeping argument might be resisted. But the strength and weakness of our argument lies in its empirical status. This is a strength when we compare it with Descartes' conception of dreaming that makes the empirically doubtful assumptions that dreams are able to replicate *any* waking experience and yet are not states of the whole subject. But it is also a weakness. Empirical characterisations are contingent and reversible. In the case of dreams this is especially a problem as data that are so hard to determine, when determined, may always rebel.

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¹ CSM II 13 (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, 1984, vol. II, p. 13.)

² CSM II 13.

³ Or as Sigmund Freud put it 'the dreams which we produce at night have, on the one hand, the greatest external similarity and internal kinship with the creations of insanity, and are, on the other hand, compatible with complete health in waking life.' *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis*, transl. A.S. Strachey, Penguin, 1962, see 'Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis', Lecture 3.

⁴ *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. MacPherson, Penguin, 1968 (1651), Part I, chap. ii, p. 90.

⁵ Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, IV.ii.14.

⁶ Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, OUP, 1962, p. 49

⁷ CSM II 14.

⁸ CSM II 49.

⁹ This, in turn, means that Descartes' own distinction between the imagination and the pure intellect, advanced at the beginning of the Sixth Meditation, is presupposed here.

¹⁰ Thoughts like this lead Norman Malcolm, in his classic monograph *Dreaming*, Routledge, 1959, to take the radical step of treating all dream accounts as unverifiable and thus the claim that we have any kind of experiences in dreams as meaningless.

¹¹ CSM II 306.

¹² Havelock Ellis, *The World of Dreams*, Constable and Co, London, 1911, see chapter one.

¹³ This is not to deny that there are dreams which involve such reflection and thus insight into one's dreaming state. These so-called 'lucid dreams' are cases where the dreamer is aware, quite rightly, that he is dreaming. As such they do not help the sceptic as the dreamer is cognisant of his or her state. An excellent introduction to the intriguing phenomenon of lucid dreams can be found in Celia Green and Charles McCreery's book *Lucid dreaming: The paradox of consciousness during sleep*, Routledge, 1994.