

DREAMS AND PHILOSOPHY Ernest Sosa

We are such stuff As dreams are made on and our little life Is rounded with a sleep...
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (IV, i, 156-157).

1. Dreams: The Orthodox Conception

Are dreams made up of conscious states just like those of waking life except for how they fit their surroundings? The orthodox answer is rendered poetically by Shakespeare: dream states and waking states are alike intrinsically though different in their causes and effects.

2. Skepticism: Hyperbolic versus Realistic

Skeptics propose scenarios of radical deception: the brain in a vat, Descartes's evil demon, Hollywood's Matrix. Such radical scenarios are often dismissed as "irrelevant alternatives" to our familiar common sense. They are alternative, incompatible ways that the world might have been, but not ones that are *relevant*. Why, exactly, *do* they fail the test of relevance? According to one popular view, a possibility is relevant only if it is not *too remote*, only if it might really happen. Possibilities like that of the evil demon or the brain in a vat are said to pose no real *threat*, being so remote.

3. What Are Dreams Made Of? Do the characters in my dreams have beliefs and intentions? They do in general, but do I myself also have them as protagonist in my dream? Unquestionably I do believe and intend things *in my dream*. In my dream I am conscious, I assent to this or that, I judge or choose. This all happens *in the dream*, of course, but does it also *really* happen, albeit while I dream? This simple question is easy enough to grasp, but surprisingly hard to answer.

4. My exposition relies heavily on distinguishing between two expressions: 'in my dream' and 'while I dream'. From the fact that *in my dream* something happens it does not follow that it happens *while I dream*. From the fact that in my dream I am chased by a lion it does not follow that while I dream I am chased. Moreover, from the fact that while I dream something happens it does not follow that it happens in my dream. From the fact that while I dream it rains and thunders it does not follow that in my dream it rains and thunders.

5. Dreams seem more like imaginings, or stories, or even daydreams, all fictions of a sort, or quasi-fictions. Even when in a dream one makes a conscious choice, one need not do so in actuality. Nor does one necessarily affirm in reality whatever one consciously affirms in a dream.

6. Dreams and Skepticism. Let us now explore what follows for philosophy from the view of dreaming as imagining. If that is the right model, then traditional formulations of radical skepticism, Descartes's included, are not radical enough. The possibility that we dream now threatens not only our supposed perceptual knowledge but even our supposed introspective knowledge, our supposed takings of the given. It is now in doubt not only whether we see a fire, but even whether we *think* we see a fire, or *experience* as if we see it. How so?

7. The cogito has got to be different nevertheless from our knowledge of a hand we see. We might try to defend the cogito by retreating to a thinner, less committing, concept of thinking, where even dreaming and imagining are themselves forms of "thinking." On the *thicker* notion of thinking, if I imagine that p, hypothesize that p, or dream that p, I do not *thereby* think that p; I may not even think that p at all. On the *thinner* notion of thinking, by contrast, in imagining that p one *does* thereby think that p. And the same is now true of dreaming. On the thinner notion, in dreaming that p, one does thereby think that p. More idiomatically, let's say rather this: in dreaming or imagining that p, one *has the thought that p*. So, "thinking that p" in the thinner sense would amount to "having the thought that p."

8. Consciously thinking that I think does have a special status: one could not go wrong in so thinking. It can thus attain high reliability and epistemic status. It attains this status through its *being* a conscious state of thinking that one thinks. Moreover, this status is not removed, or even much diminished, by the threat of an impostor state, one subjectively very much like it. A vivid and realistic dream is, of course, subjectively very much like its corresponding reality. Perhaps it is only *in my dream* that I now consciously think that I think. Despite being subjectively much like the state of thinking that one thinks, in dreaming one does *not* think; one does not so much as think that one thinks.

That is to say, even if *in one's dream* one affirmatively thinks that one thinks, this does not entail that in reality one thinks that one thinks, while dreaming.

9. Are Dreams Indistinguishable in a Way That Matters? One need not be a Freudian to believe that dreams have causes, in which case most of us might be picked at random, in a futuristic scenario, and made to dream in a connected, realistic way so that our lives become lengthy dreams. Under that Matrix-like supposition, can I be said to know that I now see a hand? I might of course be dreaming in a maximally realistic way that I see a hand. Could I reason my way out by noting that, since I am wondering whether this is just a dream, *therefore* I cannot be dreaming? Can I conclude that this must be reality, not a dream, and that I really do see a hand? No, that certainly would not satisfy. If I wonder whether I am one of the dreamers in the first place, my doubt must extend to whether I am *really* wondering, or only *dreaming* that I am wondering.

10. Let us step back. Suppose I could now about as easily be dead, having barely escaped a potentially fatal accident. Obviously, I cannot distinguish my being alive from being dead by believing myself alive when alive, and dead when dead. Similarly, I cannot distinguish my being conscious from my being unconscious by attributing to myself consciousness when conscious and unconsciousness when unconscious. But that is no obstacle to my knowing myself to be alive and conscious when alive and conscious. So, perhaps the possibility that we dream is like that of being dead, or unconscious? Even if one could never tell *that* one suffers such a fate, one can still tell that one does *not* suffer it when one does not.¹ Why not say the same of dreams?

11. At an unreflective level, epistemic justification can hence derive from the holding of a condition whose absence is no more subjectively distinguishable from its presence than is a realistic dream from waking life. However, without reflective, non-arbitrary assurance that you satisfy that condition, you are precluded from knowing reflectively something you might still know at the animal level. So far at least, we have found no way out of this predicament. Reflectively defensible perceptual knowledge still seems out of reach.

12. How to Resolve the Problem of Dream Skepticism In conclusion, here is a way out. Consider the claim that one is dreaming, which could not possibly be affirmed correctly, and is hence pragmatically incoherent. Or take the contradictory claim: that one is *not* just dreaming, which, like the *cogito*, must be right if affirmed. We can now see, reflectively, how these thoughts gain their special status. The impossibility of being affirmed falsely is thought to give the *cogito* a special status, which we can reflectively see that it has. The claim that one is not now dreaming, being equally impossible to affirm falsely, must have an equally high epistemic status, equally defensible reflectively.²

13. Suppose I have only three possible options on the question whether *p*, which I am now pondering: namely, the options of believing, suspending, or disbelieving, all consciously, since I am consciously pondering my question now. If I know that only one of my options is epistemically undefective, making it the best option, that then would seem the rational option for me to take.

¹ Cf. Bernard Williams (1978), Appendix 3.

² Williams's response to dream skepticism is like mine in one important respect (*op. cit.*), but is substantially different and incompatible on the whole. We both rely on what dreaming shares with being unconscious or dead: i.e., we both rely on your ability to tell that you avoid such a fate, when you do, despite your inability to tell that the fate befalls you when it does. The crucial respect of difference is that for Williams we do have real conscious beliefs and experiences in dreaming. Unlike my account, his preserves the special protection of the *cogito* against dream skepticism, for even if one is dreaming, when one thinks that one thinks (really thinks) one does really think, really believe consciously, or really experience, etc. Correlatively, he is also denied access to my proposed solution for the problem of dream skepticism, whether the solution is applied to the *cogito* or to the fire; according to my proposal, <I am awake> shares the special epistemic status of the *cogito*.