Part One Epistemology

Why Should We "Not Doubt Whether Our Thinking And Acting Are But Another Dream; Our Waking Some Other Species Of Sleep"?

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This essay will address the main arguments related to the question above, that is, whether there are any features of either waking life or dreaming that would allow us to adequately distinguish between the two. Central to this discussion will be the verifiability of our senses, critical examination of Descartes arguments in relation to doubt, consideration of the problems with his reasoning, and some attempts that have been made at resolving the problems generated by sceptical arguments. Finally, it will be asserted that even if it is possible to discern between waking and dreaming, there is no evidence to support the conclusion that either state represents the true state of affairs.

Descartes begins the Meditations by asserting that our senses cannot be trusted, stating that the senses sometimes deceive and that "it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once"[1], but makes it clear that he does not wish to be aligned with the sceptics. His mission was to find truth, not to descend into a never ending spiral of doubt, though we cannot but agree with Sorrel that at least one of his lesser objectives was to create "a treatise that theologians might approve of"[2].

A spiral of doubt, however, is exactly what Descartes achieved, beginning with the radical supposition that "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me"[3]. Further supposing that every one of his senses is being deceived, Descartes arrives at the *cogito*, reasoning that though the evil demon may fool all of his senses, all of the time, the one thing that Descartes can always be aware of, is his own awareness.

How then, does this help us with the distinction between waking life and dreams? Descartes himself stated that "there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep"[4], however this is surely not true; there are numerous ways to extract at least some distinction between waking life and dream states.

Firstly, our waking life is consistent, that is to say, we have memory of the past which coherently fits with our current view; I know I am writing this essay, and I can remember the question being set in the past. Of course, when dreaming, much the same type of consistency can be perceived, however, the distinction becomes clear when we return to the waking life; we can look back at our numerous dreams and not see any consistency between them; last night I was a student dreaming I was train driver, and tonight I will be a student who may be dreaming I am an astronaut. Note that this is not a means of testing whether the student or the train driver is the real me, but instead merely a way of differentiating between the consistent apparency that I am a student, and the changing appearance of my dreams.

Secondly, it has been shown that while dreaming, 'actual' events, that is to say events occurring in the reality where a man lays asleep, can affect the phenomena experienced by the dreaming man, but that the reverse is not true; events that occur in dreams, only occur within that dreamed environment and do not directly affect the waking world. As with the first example, we are no closer to discovering which, if either, of the presented environments bear most resemblance to the external world, yet we can distinguish between dreams and non-dreams.

Finally there are people whose dreams lack one or more sense present to them while awake,

1 Descartes: 12
2 Sorrel: 59
3 Descartes: 15
4 Descartes: 13

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they may dream solely in black and white, without audio, or with no sense of touch, thus they can easily tell what is a dream and what is not. This final example also presents its own problem, if a particular sense is lacking in all dreams, and the dream world represents reality as it truly is, then how is it that the non-existent sense is present in the false waking world? If colour did not exist, was not a coherent concept, I suggest that it would not be possible to dream of colour, in the same way that I only ever dream in three dimensions, because only a three dimensional reality is coherent.

Each of these distinctions is subject to Descartes' statement that "it is not impossible ... that there may be a dream continuous and lasting like the life of a man"[5], yet even if that were the case, the dream of life would still contain its own dreams, distinguishable from the life-dream in the ways mentioned above. In other words, even if we are in a dream while awake, we can detect the difference between the waking dream and the dreams we have within it. We must at least concede that if life is a dream, it is a different sort of dream to those we have while we dream that we are asleep.

The ability to distinguish between the two states however, is not enough; what is required is evidence that one state represents the true state of affairs, and one a deception. The fact that I know I am not dreaming does not imply that I know dreams to present a false set of perceptions and wakefulness to present true ones. Arguably the nearest to this crucial discovery that modern philosophy has achieved so far, is the idea of coherentism, which presents a fundamental disagreement with the thinking of Descartes. By eliminating all unfounded beliefs, Descartes implies that there is one root belief that underlies, and validates, all knowledge. Coherentists state that there is no such foundation, and that knowledge is founded upon the fact that it coherently relates to other facts, the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy states that "One can ... view coherentism ... as a version of foundationalism that holds all beliefs to be foundational"[6]. Coherentism then, can be seen as a radical shift in the way knowledge is viewed, stating that the fact that we perceive there to be connections between discrete points in our waking life is enough to prove that we are awake, because our dreams are not similarly coherent. However, Malcolm points out a monumental flaw with this reasoning, stating that "the principle (of coherence cannot) tell us whether we are noting and making connections or dreaming that we are"[7], but conceding that "coherence has a sensible application to the question '*Was* I dreaming?', but none at all to the question '*Am* I dreaming'?"[8].

Finally, it has been suggested that the entire question is misleading and insoluble, on the grounds that it implies we are capable of asserting that we are asleep. While it may seem that as we can assert that we are awake we must be able to assert the opposite, Malcolm clarifies the issue, stating that "one who is asleep cannot make judgements"[9], therefore one cannot logically say that one is asleep.[10] The obvious conclusion that if one is capable of judging then one is therefore not asleep, however, falls victim to the counter argument that questions the veracity of the claim that one is judging, and not merely dreaming that one is judging. Likewise, any claim that if one is capable of doubting whether one is judging, then one is awake, is similarly affected by the sceptic's argument; "*if* I am perplexed then I am awake; but

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5 Descartes in Malcolm: 105
6 Audi: 154
7 Malcolm: 108
8 Malcolm: 113
9 Malcolm: 112
10 For an interesting counter attack, see Canfield in Dunlop: 149

am I perplexed or do I merely dream that I am?"[11]. There does however appear to be a logical inconsistency in this argument; it must be true that if I am dreaming that I am doubting then I cannot actually be doubting, and if I am dreaming that I am doubting that I am making a judgement, then I cannot actually be doubting that I am making a judgement. If I cannot actually be doubting that I am making a judgement then I must be actually be making a judgement, and am therefore awake. The problem with this reasoning, aside from the complexity inevitably incurred when dealing with sceptical arguments, is in the assumption that if I am incapable of doubting something, it must be true – if I am incapable of doubting something, all it proves is that it is not necessarily false, not that it is true.

In conclusion we have seen how, while it may be possible to recognise some differences between waking and dreaming using various philosophical, observational or scientific methods, not only does each method fall somewhat short of providing definitive proof, but also there has yet to be seen a realistic argument outlining why our waking life should be seen as truly representing reality. It is difficult even to acknowledge that the question is coherent. As Blackburn notes "One might think that Descartes got almost everything right, or that he got almost everything wrong. The baffling thing is to defend whichever answer commends itself."[12]

[11] Malcolm: 117
[12] Blackburn: 45

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