

## **Dreaming, Philosophical Issues**

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Having fascinated some of the greatest philosophers from the earliest times, dreaming figures importantly in the history of philosophy, as in Plato's *Theaetetus*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and, perhaps most famously, Descartes's *Meditations*. By far the greatest philosophical focus on dreaming has been epistemic: Socrates suggests to Theaetetus that since he cannot tell whether he is dreaming, he cannot trust his senses to know contingent facts about the world around him. And a similar worry drives Descartes's radical doubt in the *First Meditation*. We might think that dream skepticism is, among the radical Cartesian skeptical scenarios, a particularly worrying one, since dreams, unlike evil demons, are a commonplace of everyday life.

In more recent years, philosophers have challenged some of the assumptions implicit in arguments for dream skepticism. A thorough evaluation of these challenges touches on many interesting and difficult philosophical questions; the survey we offer here will highlight connections between dreaming and contemporary philosophical questions about consciousness, imagination, and skepticism.

### **Do Dreams Involve Experiences?**

The skeptical problem posed by dreaming threatens to impugn knowledge derived from sensory experience: you cannot know there is a book before you because the sensory experiences on which you would base a belief to that effect might be the result of a dream. An essential assumption, then, is that dreams sometimes do cause such experiences. This is certainly the received view; most philosophical and psychological discussion of dreams through history has found the idea that dreams involve experiences to be so obvious as to be barely worth mentioning. But this assumption did receive a philosophical challenge in the twentieth century.

The earliest sustained challenge to the assumption that dreaming involved experience came in Norman Malcolm's 1959 book, *Dreaming*. Malcolm, developing ideas from Wittgenstein, found the idea of dream experience to be paradoxical – dream experience is thought to occur during sleep, but sleep is by definition an unconscious state. And to experience a dream while unconscious is, Malcolm thought, a contradiction. Malcolm's argument depends on Wittgensteinian ideas about criteria. To understand the sense of “dreaming” language, we consider what sort of criterion there could be for sentences like “Susan dreamt that she was inside a factory.” The only criterion, according to Malcolm, is Susan's waking report after the fact – “I was inside a factory.” But this is a waking criterion – it tells us only of a false memory she has upon waking; it does not entail anything about Susan's alleged experience during sleep. It is, Malcolm suggested, a mere grammatical accident that we describe Susan as having had an experience while asleep.

Few contemporary thinkers have been much impressed by Malcolm's argument. It strikes most as both illicitly verificationist (isn't a dreamer's memory sufficient criterion for a past dream, just as memory often provides criteria for past facts?) and psychologically naïve (Malcolm did not much appreciate incipient psychological data indicating that dreams are particularly associated with REM sleep, and going some way to explain how dream experience arises). Nevertheless, Malcolm can be seen at least to raise an epistemic question about the nature of dreams by suggesting a possible alternate explanation for dream experience – one that competes with the received one: perhaps sleeping really is an *unconscious* – in the strong sense – state, and dream reports are the results of new memories (false ones) that we acquire upon waking. It is not trivial to cite reasons favoring one view over the other. Proponents of the received view may take some solace in the structural similarities between Malcolm's challenge and more radical skeptical questions about memory – we may ask quite generally how we know some past experience to have occurred, pressing the skeptical threat that we merely acquired some (false) memory to that effect. (Compare: perhaps no one ever experiences excruciating pain; instead, certain kinds of physical damage result in *false memories of having experienced* excruciating pain.) Presumably there is an answer to this general skeptical question; one may hope that it will generalize to the case of dreaming.

In his 1976 paper, “Are Dreams Experiences?”, Daniel Dennett argued, on independent grounds, for something like Malcolm's approach to dreaming. Dennett was struck by dreams that seem to develop gradually and deliberately to a particular sort of ending, which then correlates with a real-world experience that awakens the dreamer. For example, a subject might dream about adventures on a pirate ship: he dreams that the crew turns against him, and forces him to walk the plank; just as he falls into the ocean in his dream, he wakes up as the result of a splash of cold water to his face. The striking thing about this sort of dream, to Dennett, is that the narrative of the dream seems too temporally extended to explain the connection between the real-life water and the extended water-themed story. Dennett suggests that this sort of dream is best explained by a denial of the received view that dreams involve experiences that occur over time during sleep; instead, dreams involve an unconscious ‘memory-loading’ that is activated upon waking. This memory-loading, Dennett, thinks, may occur extremely quickly, immediately prior to waking – this explains why the whole dream seems sensitive to the waking conditions.

However, Dennett admits that his evidence for the prevalence of such ‘premeditated’ dreams is anecdotal, and philosophical and psychological discussion of dreaming has, for the most part, retained the assumption that dreaming involves some sort of experience.

### **Dreaming and Imagination**

But the skeptical threat from dreams requires more than the assumption that dreaming involves *some kind* of experience – the assumption is that the dream can cause the *same* kind of experience that we have while waking; that *this very* experience I'm having now might have been the result of a dream. This conception of dream experience has been the subject of contemporary attack, with the best-articulated critiques having come from Colin McGinn and Ernest Sosa, each of whom emphasizes similarities between dream

experience and imaginative experience, suggesting that the former is more different from waking experience than has been historically appreciated.

McGinn emphasizes the distinction between the kind of sensory experience we undergo when perceiving or hallucinating – *percepts* – and imagery. Imagery is the product of an act of imagination, and does not purport to provide an imprint of the external world. With this distinction in mind, McGinn suggests, we will find reason to categorize the percept-like experience of dreams as imagery, and therefore a significantly different sort of conscious experience than we have while engaged in waking perception. He thinks, for instance, that the coherence of the dream narrative could only be explained by its genesis in an intelligent agency; and imagery, unlike percept, is the kind of thing that comes about as the product of agency. For more of McGinn’s several arguments, see his ch. 6.

It is tempting to think that the answer to this question about what sort of experience dreaming involves is to be found in neuroscience; this is right to an extent, but the role of conceptual investigation should not be underestimated. Even granted all the facts about brain activity during dreaming, there is still a place to question, for any given neural state, whether that state realizes percepts or imagery. Sometimes, defenders of the orthodox view, on which dream experience is very much like waking experience, emphasize neural similarities between dream experience and perception. Thus, in his *Dreaming: An Introduction to the Science of Sleep*, p. 108, Allan Hobson writes: “[Positron emission tomography studies] ... show an *increase* in activation of just those multimodal regions of the brain that one would expect to be activated in hallucinatory perception.... In other words, in REM [Rapid Eye Movement] sleep—compared with waking—hallucination is enhanced.” But it is not clear that the body of data Hobson points to favors the claim that dream experience is perceptual sensory experience over the competing hypothesis that it is imagery; after all, subjects who are simulating sensory experience – who are engaging with visual imagery – may also exhibit similar neural patterns to those actually undergoing the corresponding perceptual stimuli.

If McGinn is right, and dream experience is imagistic, not perceptual, then it is natural to wonder why we seem so often to be deceived by our dreams; why do we believe the contents of our dreams, when they are presented to us so differently from the way in which our waking experience presents the world around us? McGinn’s answer is that dreams cause a kind of systematic irrationality; our dream comprises a brief period of temporary insanity, during which we believe that which we imagine seeing.

But this is not the only option; we needn’t attribute such widespread, nightly irrationality. As Ernest Sosa has emphasized, there is room to question the assumption that we believe the contents of the dream at all. Just as, when a person dreams that he is being chased by a lion, it does not follow that it is true that he is being chased by a lion, so might we question whether one truly believes himself to be chased, merely in virtue of dreaming that he is chased (or dreaming that he believes himself to be chased). Perhaps our dreamer is not deceived at all.

At any given time nearly all one's beliefs remain latent. A belief might be manifest when formed, or it might occasionally rise to consciousness from storage. To make one's belief explicit is to *judge* or *assent* or *avow*, at least to oneself. One does of course retain countless beliefs while asleep and dreaming. So, one knows as one dreams that one is in bed; one lay down in the knowledge that one would be there for hours, and this knowledge has not been lost. One retains, as one drifts off to sleep, beliefs about the layout of the room: the location of one's shoes, for example, or the alarm clock, and so on. It is hard to see how one could then concurrently believe that one is being chased by a lion, rather than lying in bed, with the shoes a certain distance and direction from where one lies.

Is there something special about belief, such that dream beliefs are granted status as real beliefs, even though dream lions are not real lions? One might think that the deliberate, mental nature of dreaming might explain such a connection – perhaps anything as deliberate and internally grounded as a belief would have to really occur in order for it to occur in the dream. But a normative argument suggests otherwise; consider intentions. In a dream you covet thy neighbor's wife, in the dream a sultry object of desire. Do you then violate the Biblical injunction? If, in the dream, you go so far as to succumb, are you then subject to blame? Having sinned in your heart, not only in your dream, but in actuality, you could hardly escape discredit. Is one then blameworthy for choices made in a dream? Augustine (*Confessions X*) thought not; if he was right, then we must think carefully about whether dream intentions really imply actual intentions. And if they do not, it is not clear why beliefs should be importantly different in this respect.

A thorough investigation of the question of whether dreams involve beliefs would require as its starting point a theory of belief – something well beyond our present scope. However, it is worth noting that some plausible necessary conditions on belief-hood do not appear to be met by dreaming sleepers. Some philosophers have claimed that beliefs are, or entail, long-term dispositions; but the person dreaming himself chased by a lion has no long-term disposition to act as if he were being chased by a lion. Likewise, philosophers who emphasize behavioral or functional requirements of belief must confront a puzzle to explain what role our dreamer's representation of the lion state of affairs plays, in order to justify its belief status.

An attractive alternative proposal would have it that dreaming is an imaginative activity; when one dreams that he is being chased by a lion, he is *imagining* that he is being chased by a lion, while still tacitly believing himself to be safe in bed. This view may or may not be combined with McGinn's view about imagery, according to which the subject does not really have perceptual sensory experience as of a lion, but rather imagery instead. If we do combine this view with the imagery view, then dreams become much like vivid daydreams: we imagine stories, and supplement them with imagery. If we deny McGinn's view about imagery in favor of a more orthodox approach on which dreams do involve perceptual sensory experience, dreaming becomes more like going to the cinema: we have such real sensory experiences, and use them to guide our imaginings. Either way, we needn't accept that we *believe* the contents of the dream.

It seems, then, that the assumption that we believe what we dream is at least open to question, and may ultimately prove unfounded. What epistemic consequences follow from adopting the imagination view instead?

### **The Imagination Model and Skepticism**

Have we here found a way to defend our perceptual knowledge from the skeptic's dream argument? We have denied a premise in the skeptical argument: that, if you were dreaming, you would be having the same beliefs and sensory experience you're now having. Even if we might just as easily be dreaming that we see a hand, this does not entail that we might now be astray in our perceptual beliefs; for, even if we might be dreaming, it does not follow that we might be believing we see a hand on this same experiential basis, without seeing any hand. After all, when we believe in the dream, we do not thereby really believe. So, even if I had now been dreaming, which might easily enough have happened, I would not thereby have been thinking that I see a hand, based on a corresponding experience.

That disposes of the threat posed by dreams for the safety of our perceptual beliefs – it is not the case that our perceptually beliefs could easily have been false beliefs, caused by a dream. Does it dispose of the problem of dream skepticism? It does so if dreams create such a problem only by threatening the safety of our perceptual beliefs. *Is* that the only threat posed by dreams? Perhaps not. Perhaps our new, imagination-based, conception of dreams gives rise to an even more radical form of skepticism.

If dreaming is just imagining, 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. Just as we might be dreaming we perceive a fire without really doing so, so *in a dream* we might affirm the cogito and have experience as of a fire, without *in reality* affirming or experiencing any such thing. If dreams pose a problem for our perception of our surroundings, then on the imagination model they equally pose a problem for our apprehension of the given (Sosa 2007).

### **Further Reading**

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