

## “Skepticism and the Imagination Model of Dreaming”

Jonathan Ichikawa: ichikawa@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Ernest Sosa has argued that the solution to dream skepticism lies in an understanding of dreams as imaginative experiences – when we dream, on this suggestion, we do not believe the contents of our dreams, but rather imagine them. Sosa rebuts skepticism thus: dreams don’t cause false beliefs, so my beliefs cannot be false, having been caused by dreams.

I argue that, even assuming that Sosa is correct about the nature of dreaming, belief in wakefulness on these grounds is epistemically irresponsible. The proper upshot of the imagination model, I suggest, is to recharacterize the way we think about dream skepticism: the skeptical threat is not, after all, that we have false beliefs. So even though dreams don’t involve false beliefs, they still pose a skeptical threat, which I elaborate.

According to the **orthodox theory of dreaming**, when dreaming, a subject has misleading sensations, which typically lead to false beliefs. Descartes assumes the orthodox theory when he introduces dream skepticism: “How often,” Descartes writes, “does my evening slumber persuade me of such ordinary things as these: that I am here, clothed in my dressing gown, seated next to the fireplace—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!” (1986, p. 105) Modern dream psychologist J. Allen Hobson expresses the orthodox theory more explicitly:

What is the difference between my dreams and madness? What is the difference between my dream experience and the waking experience of someone who is psychotic, demented, or just plain crazy? In terms of the nature of the experience, there is none. In my New Orleans dream I hallucinated: I saw and heard things that weren’t in my bedroom. I was deluded: I believed that the dream actions were real despite gross internal inconsistencies. I was disoriented: I believed that I was in an old hotel in New Orleans when I was actually in a house in Ogunquit. (1999, p. 5)

We may contrast the orthodox theory with an **imagination model of dreaming**, according to which when I dream that *p*, I do not have misleading sensory experiences as of *p* and falsely believe that *p*; instead, I have sensory *imagery as if p* and propositionally *imagine that p*. That is, I *simulate* the experience of *p*. On this model, the experience of dreaming becomes more like the experience of fiction, or the experience of a vivid daydream. I don’t falsely believe myself to be flying, and to have misleading visual percepts as of the tops of clouds; instead, I’m *imagining* myself to be flying, and calling

forth visual *images* of cloud-tops.

Although the orthodox view is still orthodox, a number of recent arguments favoring the imagination view have been proposed. McGinn (2004) goes to some length to defend a hybrid imagination view, according to which dream experience is imagistic, not perceptual, but he does not extend the view to dream belief. Ernest Sosa (2007) offers considerations in favor of the view that when we dream that *p*, we do not thereby believe that *p*, but rather imagine it. I believe that there is good reason to think the imagination model to be true. A defense of the imagination model as a psychological claim is beyond my present scope – I hope to give one elsewhere. For now, I will assume it to be true in order to examine its epistemic consequences.

When McGinn refrains from extending his version of the imagination model to dream belief, he does so partially on epistemic grounds; he suggests that the imagination model defeats dream skepticism too easily. “[I]t is precisely the real presence of belief and emotion in the dream that gives Descartes’s problem bite.” (2004, p. 182) McGinn is much too quick here, for at least two reasons. First, it is not clear that, even if the imagination model is inconsistent with dream skepticism, the imagination model should therefore be rejected; perhaps it is skepticism that ought to go. Ernest Sosa rejects dream skepticism on just this basis; I will examine Sosa’s argument below. The imagination model is, after all, a psychological claim; if our best psychological theories established it as true (a matter on which there is not current consensus – I am speaking hypothetically), it would hardly do to reject those theories on the basis of their conflict with Cartesian intuitions about dream skepticism.

Second, however, it is not clear that the imagination model has the radical anti-skeptical consequence McGinn and Sosa thinks it does. It is the project of this paper to argue that, far from solving dream skepticism, the imagination model actually brings forward a fairly radical skeptical threat.

## **II. The imagination model and skepticism**

Skeptical scenarios often describe remote possible worlds: you are a brain in a vat, being fed neurological impulses by an evil scientist. It’s sometimes thought, in response to these arguments, that there is something illicitly far-fetched about such skeptical scenarios. Ernest Sosa puts the point thus:

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. (Sosa, 2007, p. 2)

The dream scenario seems, among the standard skeptical scenarios, to be uniquely resistant to this move. The dream skeptic does not invite us to worry that the world is

drastically different from the way we think it is; he merely points out what we already know: we often dream. The dream scenario is close in a way that the brain in a vat scenario is not. So dreaming seems uniquely threatening.

Ernest Sosa thinks that the imagination model of dreaming provides an answer to dream skepticism. Here is Sosa's argument. If the imagination model is correct, then we have a quick reply to the skeptic: it is not the case that my belief that I am wearing jeans is threatened by dream skepticism – for if I merely dreamt those jeans, I would only *imagine* it; there would be no false belief.

This does not seem to allay our skeptical worries. But why? My belief that I am in jeans is quite safe from the dream scenario, on the imagination model, since it could not have been caused by a dream – dream considerations provide no nearby possible worlds where I have that belief and it is false. So what worry is left? It seems to have to do with the idea that, even if my belief that I'm wearing jeans couldn't be caused by a dream, a dream could cause an experience that is *subjectively indistinguishable* from the belief that I am wearing jeans. Intuitively, I still can't rule the scenario out – I can't tell that I'm not dreaming. So now, if the imagination model is correct, instead of worrying that my belief is false, now I have to worry whether my belief is a belief! How am I to know that my internal mental experience is not the result of a dream, given the still-unshaken fact that while I am dreaming, I cannot typically recognize that I'm not awake? Sosa's strategy has two parts. In the negative part, Sosa argues that our inabilities while dreaming pose no in principle threat from indiscriminability to our waking knowledge of being awake. This is supplemented with a positive part, in which Sosa gives a positive argument for the knowability of our wakefulness, given the imagination model. On the negative part, Sosa considers an analogy between dreaming and death. He writes:

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 alive and conscious when alive and conscious. Might the possibility that we dream not be 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. Why not say the same of dreams? (p. 14)

This seems clearly right for the case of death and unconsciousness – I know that I am not dead, even though if I were dead, I wouldn't recognize it. So maybe, Sosa suggests, it's unrealistic to demand that we be able to tell the difference between dreaming and being awake from both sides – maybe one side is enough. Dream states are distinguishable from waking states if we can tell that we are waking, and not dreaming, when we are waking. That we don't have the converse ability while dreaming does not, by itself, undermine our waking knowledge. This much is surely right – subjective distinguishability is not symmetric. The second part of Sosa's strategy involves a positive

story as to how it is that we can know we're awake when we're awake. The idea is that the proposition *I am awake*, like the proposition *I am*, enjoys a special *a priori* status of rational affirmability. As Sosa puts it, each is impossible to affirm falsely. ("We can just as well affirm <I think, therefore I am awake> as <I think, therefore I am>." (p. 20)) In the case of the affirmation of wakefulness, this is so because, given the imagination model, we do not really affirm things while dreaming. (We are using 'affirm' to mean 'come to believe'.')

This is a very broad argument against dream skepticism – it does not rely on any contingent facts about how often we dream, or how compelling our dreams feel when we have them; it depends only on the imagination model as a claim about the nature of dreams. If Sosa's argument works, then it will work even in the most epistemologically problematic cases. Here is a scary dream case:

**Rip.** Rip sleeps, and dreams, twenty hours out of every day. His dreams are very compelling; upon waking, he is invariably surprised to learn that the events of his dream were not actually occurring. Sometimes when he's awake, he reflects on how often things turn out to be just dreams, and he wonders whether his current experiences are dream experiences; he sees no way to tell, other than to wait and see whether he eventually wakes up.

If the imagination model of dreaming is correct, then during the twenty hours per day when Rip is dreaming, he is not forming beliefs, but rather imagining things. If Sosa's argument works, then it will establish knowledge even for Rip: if Rip, while awake, believes himself to be awake, that belief is safe from the dream scenario; if he were dreaming, he would not have that belief – only an imagining with that content. So if Sosa is right, then even Rip is safe from the dream scenario. We can conclusively rule out the dream scenario by simply believing it not to obtain. This should strike us as a surprising conclusion about Rip. In what follows, I raise some doubts about the general strategy.

### **III. Against Sosa's argument**

I grant to Sosa that the fact that some states cannot be recognized introspectively does not imply that we cannot recognize their absence introspectively. The case of death makes this clear. But I maintain that there remain important relevant differences between dreaming and being dead. One difference is that dreaming, unlike death, is an experience; there is something that it is like to dream. So for dreaming, we may sensibly raise the question, *is this experience I'm now having a dream?* Not so for death. Furthermore, the dream states – the experiences of imagery and propositional imagination – are, in an important way, *similar to* the waking states of sensation and belief. There are several reasons to think this. For one thing, as I mentioned above, imaginative states simulate non-imaginative states; the *point* of visual imagery is to play some of the roles of visual sensory experience, in the absence of the relevant external stimuli. The *point* of propositional imagination is to allow us to use a belief-like state without actually believing its contents. Neurological data also supports this similarity claim, as Alvin Goldman (2006) has emphasized. This undercuts the analogy between dreaming and death. For any experience, we may sensibly ask whether it is dream experience or waking

experience, and it is sensible to worry whether we are making mistakes in our answer. One reason this is so is because dream experience is, in some relevant respects, similar to waking experience. By contrast, it is not sensible to wonder whether an experience is one in which one exists, or one in which one does not. There is insufficient similarity between existence and non-existence to ground such a worry. This, I suggest, generates at least some pressure against the suggestion that we can know that we're not dreaming merely by citing our beliefs.

What of Sosa's more direct argument, having to do with rational affirmability? Sosa suggests that since I can never falsely affirm that I am awake, it is always rational so to affirm. But that modal fact by itself is not enough; reliability – even perfect reliability – is insufficient for rational affirmability. (No necessary truth can be falsely affirmed, but many would be *irrational* to affirm.) Perhaps, then, we should add as a requirement that the target proposition be *recognized* as enjoying the special status. After all, once we adopt the imagination model, we do recognize the connection between affirmation and waking. So Sosa may say:

I know that I cannot falsely affirm that I am awake, so it is rational so to affirm.

I share Sosa's commitment to this antecedent, for those of us who accept the imagination model. Does the conclusion follow? I suggest that it may not. 'Affirm,' remember, entails 'believe.' This is why the imagination model precludes falsely affirming that one is not dreaming. We do not come to believe the contents of our dreams when we dream, so we do not affirm our dream events while dreaming. But we do engage in another activity that is in some ways similar to affirmation: we come to *imagine*. Call this activity *quasi-affirmation*. Quasi-affirmation is not affirmation, but it is in many ways similar to affirmation, in just the same ways that imagination is in many ways similar to belief. And from an internal point of view, for the dreamer, quasi-affirmation is importantly like – and indistinguishable from – affirmation. One cannot, then, rationally affirm that one is awake, ignoring the possibility that one is quasi-affirming something false.

It does not follow, from the fact that I know no affirmation of *p* will be a mistake, that it is rational for me to affirm *p*. If, for all I know, the mental act I'm to engage in will be a false quasi-affirming, then knowledge that I will never affirm falsely is insufficient. Compare: no one goes wrong by running the gauntlet unscathed; therefore, it is rational for me to go run it unscathed. This is a bad argument, because even though I can't go wrong in running the gauntlet unscathed, there's every chance that if I attempted to do so, I would end up in the hospital. I didn't go wrong in running the gauntlet unscathed, but I certainly went wrong.

Admittedly, there are important dissimilarities between running the gauntlet unscathed and affirming myself awake. When I resolve to run the gauntlet, I run a significant personal danger – I run the risk of bodily damage. When I resolve to affirm myself awake, I do not run the risk of forming a false belief. Perhaps, someone taking Sosa's line will object, the fact that there is no risk of a false belief means that there is no epistemic

danger in affirmations of wakefulness.<sup>1</sup> We should not find this objection compelling. The case of Rip shows that not all epistemic risks are risks of having false beliefs. If Rip is sufficiently reckless, he will, whenever the question comes up, say to himself that he is awake. Sometimes – when he is awake – he will be affirming truly. More often – when he is dreaming – he will be quasi-affirming falsely. Reckless Rip’s epistemic behavior is irresponsible; this can only be because false quasi-affirming counts as an epistemic danger.

Here is a similar point. Beliefs in one’s own wakefulness are very safe from the dream scenario, for there are no nearby possible worlds where they’re false, having been caused by dreams. But safety is only one valuable epistemic state, and the kind of safety that has been established here need not be a great credit to the believer. Consider a variant on the Fake Barn Country thought experiment in which the believer’s belief is very safe, if safety is construed along the lines of ‘no nearby worlds where I have this belief falsely’:

### **Safe Barn in Fake Barn Country**

Henry is driving around in the country, and he sees a bunch of things that look like barns. Henry picks out a barn-looking thing and says to himself, *that’s a barn*.

As it happens, Henry is in Fake Barn Country, where most of the barn-looking things are fake barns. The thing Henry singled out was, in fact, the only real barn in Fake Barn Country, although it had no visible distinguishing marks.

Furthermore, the barn that Henry saw was *modally robust*. In all the nearby possible worlds, that barn was present (and was a barn). The people of Fake Barn Country took that barn very seriously; if it ever fell down, the entire town would have made its restoration their first priority. No one would dream of putting a fake barn *there*.

Henry’s belief is true and justified and safe, but it is not knowledge; the differences between this story and the traditional Fake Barn Country story are irrelevant to the evaluation of Henry’s belief. This shows that safety – at least when the content of the belief is held constant between neighboring worlds – is not what goes wrong here. Henry is *lucky* to have formed a true belief; he might easily have been looking at a barn façade instead. And Henry isn’t so different from my dreamer, Rip, who affirms that he’s awake while he happens to be awake. He’s lucky, too – he might easily have gone wrong in affirming his wakefulness; he might’ve been asleep, and quasi-affirmed instead of affirmed. Rip is relevantly like Henry; each belief is deficient for the same reason. This contradicts Sosa’s treatment of dream skepticism, on which Rip’s waking belief should count as knowledge.

(I have characterized Henry’s and Rip’s beliefs as safe but lucky; one might alternatively build anti-luck into safety. This move would undermine the safety of the fake barn case,

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to an anonymous *Philosophical Quarterly* referee for objecting in this way.

but it would also undermine the safety of wakefulness: if Rip affirms while waking, he is lucky to have chosen a time when he happened to be awake.)

One might think that there is an important difference between Henry and Rip in that Henry was at risk of forming a false *belief*, while Rip was not. One might admit that both were lucky, but claim that Rip knows and Henry doesn't because Rip's luck didn't save him from a false belief. It's true that this is a difference between the cases, but I do not think it is an important factor in Henry's non-knowledge. Consider Leila:

Internally, Leila's mental life is similar to yours or mine. However, Leila is watched over by an unusual demon. Whenever the demon sees that Leila is about to form a belief that is false, he interferes, causing her to imagine the content of that would-be belief instead of believing it. So she often affirms truly, but never falsely; the worst she does is to quasi-affirm falsely. She does this about as often as most people falsely affirm.

Leila never has false beliefs, and her beliefs are extremely safe, but her epistemic position is not thereby excellent. If she knows about her demon, then she may know that for any proposition, she cannot wrongly affirm it; this does not license her rationally to affirm just anything. Rational affirmations are based on sound treatment of available evidence, not on guarantees of non-inaccuracy.

#### **IV. A new skepticism**

To recap: I have argued thus far that dream experiences are sufficiently similar to waking experiences to justify worries about whether we can know that our present experiences aren't dream ones. This, I suggest, is consistent with the imagination model, according to which we do not believe but rather imagine the contents of our dreams. It follows from this that there is room to worry whether we believe those things that we take ourselves to believe. This threatens to turn a traditional Cartesian epistemology on its head. Descartes wanted to examine all of his beliefs, to see which of them met his high standards; but the imagination model suggests that there is room to doubt not only which beliefs are true, but even which belief-like states are beliefs. Less, then, will end up 'given' than Descartes assumed. This may even threaten our most basic knowledge, in a Cartesian framework.

Here is a completely general version of the skeptical challenge: to have an ideal form of knowledge – *reflective* knowledge – one must be able to defend one's belief against salient alternative explanations. In order reflectively to know, one must know (or be in a position to know) that he knows. To know that one knows, one must know that one believes, since knowledge transparently entails belief. But to know (again, in this reflective way) that one believes requires ruling out all relevant alternatives – including, in this case, that one does not believe, but merely imagines. An imagining is not the sort of thing that can qualify as knowledge. So, here is the general argument against reflective knowledge of any *p*. I am assuming, with philosophical tradition, that we have no internally accessible test for wakefulness; I will question this assumption in my conclusion.

- (1) To have reflective knowledge that  $p$ , I must be in a position reflectively to know that I know that  $p$ . (Assumed)
- (2) To be in a position to reflectively know that I know that  $p$ , I must be in a position reflectively to know that I *believe* that  $p$ . (Assumed)
- (3) In general, if there are nearby possible worlds I cannot rule out where not- $q$ , then I cannot know that  $q$ . (Assumed)
- (4) If there are nearby possible worlds I cannot rule out where I do not believe that  $p$ , then I am not in a position reflectively to know that I believe that  $p$ . (Instance of 3)
- (5) There are nearby possible worlds I cannot rule out where I do not believe that  $p$ . (Implication of imagination model)
- (6) I am not in a position reflectively to know that I believe that  $p$ . (4, 5, *modus ponens*)
- (7) I cannot have reflective knowledge that  $p$ . (2, 6, *modus ponens*)

If I am right about this, the imagination model of dreaming, along with the assumption that we cannot distinguish dreams from wakeful life on substantive grounds, is devastating for any Cartesian-style anti-skeptical project. Reflective knowledge is impossible, because we have no reliable way of recognizing our beliefs. Any attempt to begin an epistemology by examining our beliefs is undermined by dream skepticism.

What is new about this argument, other than its novel structure, is its wide scope. This argument provides a perfectly general argument against knowledge of any proposition – even those propositions that are generally thought to have a special, *a priori* status. The *cogito*, for instance, does not appear to have a special immunity from this argument, the way it does from the more traditional Cartesian worries.

This is not, of course, to embrace skepticism; it is a familiar point that Descartes seems to have set the bar for knowledge much too high – it is a commonplace that our ordinary empirical beliefs do not reach it. I suggest that, on the imagination model, even the *cogito* may not reach it. (However, there may be an anti-skeptical complication. If, as is plausible, we retain *tacit* beliefs while dreaming, it is not the case that dreaming provides nearby worlds where we fail to believe in our existence – so premise (4) may not be true for propositions like the *cogito* after all. A careful treatment of this point would involve a theory of tacit belief, a story about what sorts of things we tacitly believe, and an exploration of the principles relating tacit belief to reflective knowledge.<sup>2</sup>)

I think that these considerations invite an alternative way to think about skepticism. On a traditional understanding of skepticism, the relevant threat is that we have false beliefs. I think that considerations raised here demonstrate that this is an incomplete

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to an anonymous *Philosophical Quarterly* referee for this observation.

characterization. For I agree with Sosa that since the imagination model is correct, there is no threat from dreaming of our having false perceptual beliefs – that the dream possibilities we’re to worry about aren’t possibilities in which we believe falsely. And yet I maintain, given our inability to distinguish dream experience from waking experience, things have gotten worse, not better, for the anti-skeptic.

Here is a suggestion: the real specter of skepticism isn’t that we have false beliefs. The real specter of skepticism is that *these things I believe* – here I am referring *de re* – are false. That is, that I am not really a philosopher; that Neil Armstrong did not really walk on the moon; that there really is no external world. A possible world in which there are no tables is, if I cannot rule it out, an epistemic danger; adding to the scenario that I do not *believe* there are any tables is, if I still cannot rule it out, no less dangerous. This is the lesson of Rip and Leila; it is not enough to dispel a skeptical worry to observe that, if the worry obtained, one would not have a false belief.

### **V. Conclusion**

I am not a skeptic; I think that I know that I am at a table, and I think that I know that I am not dreaming. But I think that there is a serious skeptical challenge raised by dreaming – and particularly by the imagination model of dreaming. My project here has been to articulate that challenge in as strong a form as possible. The correct response to that challenge, I think, will be based in a solid understanding of the role of imagination in dreaming, the nature of imagination, and the epistemology of imagination: of crucial importance is how we can and do know the difference between our beliefs and our imaginings. There may be some reason for optimism in the observation that we do not, in typical (waking) situations, confuse the two; we do, for the most part, manage to know which things we believe and which ones we imagine. An important epistemic project is to investigate how we are able to achieve this discrimination; we may hope that what explains this knowledge can also explain our knowledge of our own wakefulness. I hope to explore this project in future work.

It should be clear that the imagination model of dreaming importantly changes the shape of debates about dream skepticism. Once we deny the Cartesian assumption that we believe what we dream, what epistemic consequences follow? I have argued against Sosa’s suggestion that affirmations of wakefulness are automatically justified, and instead argued that, absent a basis for distinguishing waking life from dream, the imagination model poses an important epistemic threat: not the threat that we might have false beliefs, but the threat that *these* propositions – here I am pointing to the ones we believe – may be false (and not after all believed). I closed with a brief suggestion as to how we ought to proceed in pursuit an epistemology of wakefulness. Whether or not this tentative suggestion turns out to be right, it should be clear that there is an important place for psychological questions about the imagination in future investigation of dream skepticism.<sup>3</sup>

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