

Nenad Petkovic

Lucid Dreams and Dream Skepticism

Summary of the thesis

The overall goal of the thesis is to offer a new way of responding to dream skepticism. This goal is to be achieved in four steps, corresponding to the four chapters of the thesis. Chapter I starts off by outlining a scientific approach to the problem of dream skepticism. First, I try to provide a scientific understanding of dreams with emphasis on how we are deceived in dreams. I also discuss various competing theories within contemporary dream science to show that the understanding of dreams I use can be accepted by any of them. As a result of scientific findings, lucid dreams, phenomena that have some feature of dreams and some feature of waking consciousness, emerge. I provide a brief scientific account of lucid dreams. Lucid dreams are dreams in which a dreamer knows that she is dreaming. The first chapter, hopefully, provides us with a proper understanding of dreams: in dreams we are deluded due to impaired cognitive capacities such as reflective thought and memory, but this situation can be improved by learning to dream lucidly. How exactly the situation can be improved and whether it can help us to fight dream skepticism will be answered in chapters 3 and 4. Recent interest in the nature of dreams inspired the philosophical debate between proponents of the imagination and the hallucination model of dreaming and that debate

is also discussed in this chapter. Chapter I ends by a discussion of the reliability of dream reports that are a starting point of dream science.

The goal of Chapter 2 is to show the specific character of dream skepticism in comparison with arguments using other types of skeptical scenarios such as the brain-in-a-vat (BIV), and the Matrix. The first half of Chapter 2 is dedicated to the discussion of the similarities and differences of different skeptical scenarios.

For each of these scenarios two types of skeptical arguments could be devised. I call them A-type and B-type arguments. These are ideal type of skeptical arguments, and at the end of Chapter 2, I demonstrate how they are employed in some well-known reconstructions of dream skepticism.

The distinguishing features of A-type arguments could be summarized as follows:

It can be applied to every proposition as long as knowledge of that proposition depends on evidence based on perceptual experience; it does not explicitly rely on the epistemic principles of closure and the KK principle; and in its general form, it strongly relies on an internalist conception of knowledge and evidence.

The B type argument essentially goes as follows:

- i. I can't know whether I am in a Bad Case
- ii. Closure based premise – if I can't know whether I am in Bad Case, then I can't know
p
- iii. I can't know p.

I will compare how this argument works with different skeptical scenarios. If a skeptical argument uses the BIV scenario as a Bad Case, premise 2 follows from the closure principle and the construction of the BIV scenario. However, the same is not true of the dream scenario, because dreams are not logically incompatible with the truth of all of our beliefs about the external world. Hence the dream skeptical argument will need some extra assumptions. The conclusion of Chapter 2 will be the identification of the premises of the skeptical arguments which can be questioned if we have a proper understanding of dreams.

Both traditional skeptics and modern anti-skeptics agree that in dreams we lack knowledge. But the lack of knowledge in dreams need not be an obstacle in fighting dream skepticism. Some strategies insist that as long as one can know that one is not dreaming while awake, it is irrelevant whether one can know that one is dreaming while dreaming. Chapter 3 explores two of these strategies by Bernard Williams and Ernest Sosa, as well as the attempt that probably inspired them - the strategy argued by Descartes at the end of Sixth Meditation.

Descartes tries to fight the dream skeptic by using the coherence criterion: Dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. We can know that we are awake and not dreaming iff (1) the experience appear coherent; and (2) there is a clear and distinct recognition of the causal source of the experience.

Bernard Williams argues that the source of the dream skepticism is a false conviction that if one is to know that one is not dreaming one should know both conjuncts of the following conjunction: One has to be able to tell that one is awake when one is awake and one has to be able to tell that

one is dreaming when one is dreaming. This was the case because of the misconception of the nature of dreams - in dreams, according to Williams, we cannot judge and rationally decide and because of that, we cannot perform tests for deciding if we are dreaming or not. This, however does not prevent us from deciding that we are awake while awake.

Sosa offers a two-step strategy. In the negative part, along the lines first offered by Williams, he argues that the fact that while we are dreaming we are unable to distinguish whether we are dreaming or awake does not imply that we are unable to do that while we are awake. Like Williams, he compares it with being dead or being unconscious. I know that I am not unconscious, even though if I were unconscious I would not know that. So dreams are distinguishable from waking experiences if we can tell that we are awake (and not dreaming) while we are awake. The fact that we cannot distinguish these states when we are dreaming does not threaten the knowledge we have when we are awake. In the positive part Sosa tries to show how we can know that we are awake while we are awake by arguing that the proposition ‘I am awake’ as well as the proposition ‘I am’ has a special a priori status in a way that it is impossible for any of them to be affirmed falsely, because, if the imagination model of dreaming is correct, then in dreams we do not really affirm or assent anything.

All three strategies are vulnerable to what I call ‘Hobbes’ objection’, following the argument which was originally presented as a response to the Meditations by Hobbes. According to this line of reasoning, dreams can offer the illusion of coherence, rational decision or assenting to propositions: they can *seem* every bit as well ordered and well-connected within the dream world, as waking experience is in the real world. As long as these dreams are allowed, the proponents of

these strategies will be unable to decide if they are really affirming, rationally judging or applying the coherence criterion, or just suffering an illusion of doing so.

In the last chapter I start with establishing that although in lucid dreams, like in non-lucid dreams we do not have perceptual knowledge, there is still some knowledge that we can have. We can know in lucid dreams that we are dreaming and that our ongoing experiences are not caused by the external world. Although this knowledge does not defeat dream skepticism, I argue that it can serve as an important step in a broader anti-skeptical strategy.

Descartes's, Williams's, and Sosa's strategies can be summarized as follows: we test an experience for coherence, and since the illusion of coherence in dreams is possible, we mistakenly declare the presence of coherence. I propose a way to avoid this mistake. There is an additional procedure that can be applied in order to exclude cases of illusion of coherence. A lucid dreamer can determine whether she has the dreams of the kind Hobbes is talking about by trying to do something that would be impossible to do, were she awake. Since the dream world is not subject to the laws of physics, the lucid dreamer can try to levitate, for example. If she is successful, then she knows that she is dreaming. Or she can try to perform some of the actions that can be performed only in waking life. If she is successful, that would indicate was awake and Hobbes' objection would fail. If she cannot successfully perform this action that would again indicate that she is dreaming. The full response to dream skepticism requires the possibility of effectively distinguishing dreams and waking experiences. This is possible for a lucid dreamer.

The final sections of the thesis are dedicated to responses to the objections to the approach I suggested. The main objection could be formulated like this: is it necessary for everyone to learn how to dream lucidly in order to know any proposition about the external world? Hopefully,

answers to this objection will give us some interesting insights into the nature of our knowledge of the external world.