

## The Cartesian Dreaming Argument for External World Skepticism

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Descartes' was not the first worried philosophical reference to dreaming as an epistemological issue. But he made the worry especially famous. It has since developed into an argument – usually deemed Cartesian, at least in spirit – which many epistemologists regard as needing to be defeated if external world knowledge is to be possible. (Descartes' use of the worry helped even to define the category of external world knowledge in the first place. Such knowledge amounts, in his treatment of it, to knowledge of the physical world.) Even if not always in the suggestive but elliptical way used by Descartes, the skeptical argument is routinely taught in introductory philosophy courses – general ones, as well as metaphysics and epistemology ones.

This argument is epistemological, skeptically so. It challenges the thesis – one which, for most of us, is an unquestioned presumption – that people are able to have even some knowledge of a physical world, including of their own physical aspects. The argument is generally called "Cartesian" in honor of René Descartes (1596-1650), even though a much earlier version of the argument was advanced by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus* (at 158a-e). Descartes' version has been the historically influential one. Most famously presented in his 1641 *Meditations on First Philosophy* ("Meditation I"), it was a dramatic moment within philosophy's most celebrated expression and exploration of sustained doubt. These skeptical thoughts by Descartes – followed immediately within the *Meditations* by his

attempts to resolve them – were pivotal in the formation of modern philosophy, let alone modern epistemology.

The argument has since been formulated more fully within contemporary epistemology, along the way acquiring the status of a paradigm form of skeptical challenge. Whenever contemporary epistemologists seek to defuse skeptical reasoning, this particular piece of skeptical reasoning – the Cartesian dreaming argument for external world skepticism – often serves as their representative target. This is partly because knowledge of the physical world is something that people seem so manifestly and so often to have and to use.

The Cartesian argument's importance is also due partly to its apparent metaphysical ramifications. It has either reflected or suggested the possibility of people living only as thinking things – within their “inner” worlds of thoughts and apparent sensations, not knowing if there is any “outer” world beyond these.

Descartes' argument reaches that stage by seizing upon the possibility of something – dreaming – that can strike us as being a vivid yet deceitful sort of experience. We believe we can be deceived, when dreaming, into thinking that we are really experiencing the physical world as it is. The skeptical argument challenges us to know that this is not happening *whenever* we think we are really experiencing the physical world. If we do not know that this is not happening, do we know that the world is at all as it seems to us to be? The skeptical conclusion is that we do not, even when everything seems normal to us.

That argument has inspired many attempted refutations, because most epistemologists are not skeptics. Many, even so, treat it as an important way of challenging us, not to prove that we have knowledge of the physical world, but to explain how we have such knowledge. We seem to rely just on our sensory experiences. How could these be adequate, though, if they can be mimicked in dreaming?

*At the same time I must remember that I am a man, and that consequently I am in the habit of sleeping, and in my dreams representing to myself the same things or sometimes even less probable things, than do those who are insane in their waking moments. How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear and distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment. And my astonishment is such that it is almost capable of persuading me that I now dream. [Descartes, Meditation I, 145-6]*

Technical terms used in the ensuing argument:

Experience: an occurrence within someone's awareness or consciousness.

Sensory experience: an experience resulting from the use of one or more of the person's senses (sight, hearing, etc.)

Content (of an experience): the details of what (according to the experience) reality is like in some respect; how, in some respect, the experience portrays the world as being.

Conclusive: rationally conclusive: ruling out all possible rational doubts about the accuracy of the content at hand.

Certainty: rational certainty: having ruled out all possible rational doubts about the accuracy of the content at hand.

P1. Consider at random any actual or possible experience (call it E) that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world.

P2. Any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world has a content to the effect that the physical world is thus-and-so in some more or less specific respect.

C1. E has a content to the effect that the physical world is thus-and-so in some more or less specific respect (instantiation, P2).

P3. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if it has a content to the effect that the physical world is thus-and-so in some more or less specific respect, then it includes no further content.

C2. If E has a content to the effect that the physical world is thus-and-so in some more or less specific respect, then E includes no further content (instantiation, P3).

C3. E includes no further content (*modus ponens*, C1, C2).

P4. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if it includes no further content, then in particular it includes no further and conclusive mark or indication of not being an instance of dreaming.

C4. If E includes no further content, then in particular E includes no further and conclusive mark or indication of not being an instance of dreaming (instantiation, P4).

C5. In particular, E includes no further and conclusive mark or indication of not being an instance of dreaming (*modus ponens*, C3, C4).

P5. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if in particular it includes no further and conclusive mark or indication of not being an instance of dreaming, then it is not providing conclusive evidence of not being an instance of dreaming.

C6. If in particular E includes no further and conclusive mark or indication of not being an instance of dreaming, then E is not providing conclusive evidence of not being an instance of dreaming (instantiation, P5).

C7. E is not providing conclusive evidence of not being an instance of dreaming (*modus ponens*, C5, C6).

P6. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if it is not providing conclusive evidence of not

being an instance of dreaming, then the person who is or would be having the experience does not know with certainty that it is not an instance of dreaming.

C8. If E is not providing conclusive evidence of not being an instance of dreaming, then the person who is or would be having E does not know with certainty that it is not an instance of dreaming (instantiation, P6).

C9. The person who is or would be having E does not know with certainty that it is not an instance of dreaming (*modus ponens*, C7, C8).

P7. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if the person who is or would be having it does not know with certainty that it is not an instance of dreaming, then she does not know at all that it is not an instance of dreaming.

C10. If the person who is or would be having E does not know with certainty that it is not an instance of dreaming, then she does not know at all that E is not an instance of dreaming (instantiation, P7).

C11. The person who is or would be having E does not know at all that it is not an instance of dreaming (*modus ponens*, C9, C10).

P8. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if the person who is or would be having it does not know at all that it is not an instance of dreaming, then she does not know at all that it is a sensory experience of the physical world.

C12. If the person who is or would be having E does not know at all that it is not an instance of dreaming, then she does not know at all that E is a sensory experience of the physical world (instantiation, P8).

C13. The person who is or would be having E does not know at all that it is a sensory experience of the physical world (*modus ponens*, C11, C12).

P9. For any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world, if the person who is or would be having the experience does not know at all that it is a sensory experience of the physical world, then it is not providing her with any knowledge of the physical world.

C14. If the person who is or would be having experience E does not know at all that it is a sensory experience of the physical world, then E is not providing her with any knowledge of the physical world (instantiation, P9).

C15. E is not providing any knowledge of the physical world to the person who is or would be having experience E (*modus ponens*, C13, C14).

C16. Any actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world is not providing any knowledge of the physical world to the person who is or would be having the experience (universal generalization, P1, C15).

C17. No actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world is providing knowledge of the physical world to the person who is or would be having the experience (quantifier-negation, C16).

P10. If no actual or possible experience that does or would feel like a sensory experience of the physical world is providing knowledge of the physical world to the person who is or would be having the experience, then knowledge of the physical world is impossible.

C18. Knowledge of the physical world is impossible (*modus ponens*, C17, P10).