

## The Dream Argument and Descartes' First Meditation

Peter Simpson

It is a standard criticism of Descartes' dream argument that it must necessarily fail because it is inconsistent with itself: it has to assume the truth of what it sets out to deny. It concludes that there is no difference between dreaming and waking and that our experiences may be false delusions, while the premises, which liken waking to dreaming and assert the illusory character of the latter, presuppose that there is such a difference. As Ryle said in criticism of the argument from illusion, "just as it makes no sense to talk of counterfeit coins when there are no genuine ones to contrast them with, so it makes no sense to talk of illusory experiences like dreams without waking and veridical ones to contrast them with."<sup>1</sup> I believe that, despite several attempts to argue the contrary, this criticism is correct. However, I also believe that it is a criticism that needs stating with some care. This is because the inconsistency in the dream argument is present at more than one point, and because it appears to be present at a point where in fact it is not. I shall try to show this in Part I of what follows. In Part II I shall make some remarks about Descartes' procedure in *Meditation I* arising from reflections on why he committed the error in question.

### Part I

In the passage where Descartes presents the dream argument he argues as follows. First he notes that he sleeps and that there are occasions when he thinks he is awake and in the presence of real objects but is in fact asleep and dreaming. Then he says that that does not appear to be the case now, for what happens in sleep does not appear "so clear and so distinct" as his present

---

<sup>1</sup> G. Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge University Press, 1960), pp. 94-95.

experiences. But while reflecting on this he reminds himself that he has had similar experiences in his dreams and been deceived by them; “dwelling carefully” on this reflection he sees “so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep” that he is “lost in astonishment.” His astonishment is such, he says, that it is “almost capable” of persuading him that he is now dreaming, and from this he goes on to say, “now let us assume that we are asleep and that all these particulars, e.g. that we open our eyes, shake our head, extend our hands, and so on, are but false delusions.”<sup>2</sup>

Descartes betrays a certain hesitancy in the use of the phrases “almost capable” and “now let us assume.” How far does he think the argument justifies the conclusions that we are asleep and that our experiences are false delusions? This is not as important a question as it may seem, for what matters here is not the degree of force the argument has but what its structure is meant to be. Descartes clearly intends its structure to be such that it establishes at least the possibility of the conclusions, and hence that it allows one to assume them. So he does intend the argument to be taken as establishing this possibility, even if he hesitates about how strong a possibility it is. It is as an argument intended to be taken in this way that is under examination here.

Notice, then, first of all, that the fact that we are sometimes deceived into believing we are awake when really asleep, and the fact dreams are illusions, are not used to establish that there are no “certain indications” for distinguishing waking from sleeping; this is something Descartes “sees” when he directs his attention to instances of waking experiences and dreams. If this does not seem sufficiently clear from the text, it can be made clearer if one notes that omitting any reference to the facts in question does not change anything here. Descartes writes: “I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, (Cambridge University Press, 1911), vol. 1, pp. 145-146.

in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly...” Despite the impression given by Descartes’ words, one could replace “I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions” with “I have in sleep had similar impressions” and not affect at all the “seeing” that there are no “certain indications.”

The second comment I want to make follows from this. The claim that there are no certain indications is a distinct stage of the argument; it is the first point Descartes needs to establish so that, on the basis of it, he can go on to draw the conclusions he wants. In other words, his argument has two stages in it: the first stage (1) ends in the claim that there are no certain indications for distinguishing dreaming and waking, and the second stage (2) draws, as a result of this, the inferences (a) that we are now, or may now be, dreaming, and (b) that what we experience may be false delusions. That (1) is a first and separate stage, necessary to establish what is to follow in (2), is, I think, clear enough, but it is well to have this explicitly set out, so that there is no doubt about it. In some analyses this has not always been made evident. However, if this is the case, and the dream argument is double in the way indicate, at what point, if at all, does it commit the inconsistency of which it is accused? In (1) or (2) or both?

To take (1) first of all. Might the very claim that there are no certain indications to distinguish waking from dreaming be inconsistent, or hide an implicit inconsistency? Some seem to think so, for what this claim amounts to is that there is no real difference between dreaming and waking; but to be able to claim this one has to take each class of experiences separately—i.e., dreams and waking experiences—and compare, them in order to look for the presence or absence of distinguishing marks, and one could not do this if they were not different experiences and different in a way we could detect. Accordingly, it would be inconsistent to go on and say that they were not really different after all. In other words the very fact that we can speak of

dreams on the one hand and waking experiences on the other is a sign that they are different. This is, I take it, one of the points Austin is making in a passage of *Sense and Sensibilia*.<sup>3</sup>

The inconsistency may, however, be only apparent and not very serious, because the claim can be presented in such a way that it need not deny the distinction in the same sense in which it has to presuppose it. This may be seen if one views what is going on as a sort of testing of an hypothesis. One may take the ordinary common-sense distinction between dreaming and waking (which may work well enough at this level), and see if there really is a hard and fast distinction there after all, one that will stand up to skeptical doubt. This is, in fact, Descartes' strategy and as such it is fair enough. One may then construe the reasoning as follows. If the distinction is genuine, there must be some difference that enables us to establish this with certainty; on examination one finds that this is not the case (because, for example, there is nothing any waking experience has that some dream may not have). So, contrary to appearances, the distinction is not genuine after all. Thus one does not deny in the same sense what one has to suppose, for one only needs to suppose the apparent difference that is made at the level of common-sense, and one only denies that there is a genuine difference lying behind it. Construed in this way the argument is not inconsistent. It would be, of course, if it were taken as denying in the same sense what it has to suppose, but my point here is simply that one need not take it like this, and that therefore up to this stage, whatever other difficulties it may labor under, the argument is at least not inconsistent. Since it would otherwise fall at the first hurdle, I will assume from now on that this is how (1) is to be taken.

If (1), as so construed, is not inconsistent, what about (2)? First it must be remembered that (2) is an inference from (1). It uses (1) as its basis and presupposes that it is true; for it is only when one has shown that there is nothing certain to distinguish dreaming and waking that

---

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 48-49.

one can go on to conclude that we may now be dreaming, and that as a result all our experiences may be illusions. I think this must be stressed, for the nature of the logical order of (2) to (1) determines how one is to set about assessing (2), namely that since (1) is presupposed we must assess (2) on the supposition that (1) is true. Well then, granted this, what does it tell us about (2)? Within (2) there are two parts; (2a) is a separate point from (2b) as is clear from this, that if one assents to (2a) one has not *eo ipso* assented to (2b), for one needs in addition the further premise that dreams are illusory. This premise may seem too obvious to require stating, but that it is required nevertheless does show that (2a) and (2b) are different steps in the argument.

To take (2a) first then. How is it supposed to follow from (1)? Since (1) says that there are no certain indications for distinguishing dreaming and waking, and (2a) says that therefore we may now be dreaming, it appears we need some such conditional premise as: if there are no certain indications, then we may now be dreaming. Once this conditional is made explicit, it can be seen that it is false; the consequent here stated is not the consequent of this antecedent. If there is nothing certain to distinguish dreaming and waking, then there is nothing certain to show that dreaming is a different sort of experience from waking, and so nothing certain to show that, when we are talking of dreams, we are talking of anything different from what we talk of when we are talking of waking experiences. That is, there is nothing certain to show that the terms are not really synonymous.<sup>4</sup> So, if one wants to follow the dream argument through, as Descartes does, what one must take seriously is not the possibility that we are now dreaming as opposed to being awake, but the possibility that the terms ‘waking’ and ‘dreaming’ are synonyms.

---

<sup>4</sup> They would signify the same in the way that the English term ‘tap’ and the American term ‘fawcett’ signify the same, not in the way the terms ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ signify the same. Although in the latter case the same object is indicated, the same property of it is not. The planet Venus may be both the morning and the evening star, but its appearing in the morning is not its appearing in the evening. However, in the case of tap and fawcett this is not so, and the same will hold of dreaming and waking on the condition that there is no genuine difference between them.

This has two immediate consequences of some importance. First it means that it does not matter which term one uses to describe one's experience; since they are synonyms either will do. Second it means that, whichever term is used, one cannot use it as if it stood in opposition to, or excluded, the other; synonyms are equivalent, not contrasting, terms. Descartes, however, proceeds in a way that contradicts both these consequences. He only gives one of the alternatives, that we are now dreaming, and makes no mention of the fact that, in the context, the other, that we are now awake, is just as good; and, more seriously, he implies that the one he gives excludes the other, that to say we are now dreaming is to deny that we are now awake. This is where he commits the inconsistency of which he is accused: his argument requires him to treat 'waking' and 'dreaming' as synonymous, but he proceeds to do the opposite. The above conditional premise is false, in other words, because the consequent which Descartes gives clashes with the antecedent instead of following from it.

The extent to which Descartes is inconsistent here is made more evident by (2b). To say that our experiences are, or may be, illusory requires, as has been said, that it be true both that we are dreaming and that dreams are illusions. But the first of these is false in the way it is taken, for it is taken as excluding being awake, which, in the context, it can no longer do, and the second requires one to commit the same error again. Ordinarily if we were asked to say why we believe dreams to be illusory we would reply that we do so by contrasting them with our waking experiences, that we know dreams are illusory because when we wake up we find things are not as we dreamt them. We thus say dreams are illusory because we refer to waking experiences as a class of experiences that are distinct from them and veridical. But it is no longer possible to do this, for, as a result of (1), 'waking experiences' and 'dreams' must be treated as synonymous expressions. Hence one cannot talk of the former in opposition to the latter, nor can one appeal to

the former as if it signified a distinct sort of experience by reference to which one could establish the illusory character of the latter.

One can illustrate the illegitimacy of Descartes' procedure in the dream argument by noting that it is possible, on the basis of (1), to give an exactly parallel argument that would come to the opposite conclusion. Instead of the proposition that we are dreaming, one takes the logically permissible alternative, that we are awake (for as synonymous these two say the same), and instead of the premise that dreams are illusory, one takes the premise that waking experiences are veridical. Now as far as the facts appealed to are concerned, however inconsistent that appeal may be here, this latter premise has the same status as the former (indeed it has, if anything, a higher status, for it is by our veridical waking experiences that we judge that dreams are illusory, and not vice versa). Hence if it is legitimate to use the former, it must also be legitimate to use the latter. Taking this together with the premise that we are awake, one has the result that our experiences, including our dreams, are veridical. Now as one must allow this alternative way of proceeding from (1) to stand if one allows the way Descartes proceeds from (1) to stand, one consequently gets the nonsensical result that our experiences, both waking and dreaming, are veridical as well as illusory, and at the same time. But neither way must be allowed to stand, for both are ruled out by (1) itself, and for the same reason, that they are inconsistent with it.

One may summarize the result of the above discussion as follows. once it has been asserted that there is nothing certain to distinguish dreaming and waking, which is only the first part of the dream argument, the rest of that argument has to be rejected. One cannot go on to conclude that we are now dreaming, if by that one intends to rule out our also being awake, nor can one go on to conclude that our experiences are illusory. All there is left to say is that there

are experiences which are equally correctly described as dreaming or waking. Whether these experiences are illusory or veridical it is not possible to say as far as the dream argument is concerned. There may be some way of detecting this, but if so it has to be established independently; the dream argument does not provide one.

The inconsistency in the dream argument that vitiates it is apt to be missed. First, beside the real inconsistency, there is an apparent one, and it is easy to confuse the two. Second, sufficient attention is not always paid to the question what the consequences of (1) really are. This is because in one sense the conclusion that we are now dreaming is validly deduced from (1), for since it is, in the context, synonymous with the conclusion that we are now awake, it makes no difference which one is said; both are equally correct. It is not validly deduced, however, if it is taken as not being synonymous and so as ruling out saying we are awake. This is the way it is taken by Descartes, and it is because of this that the argument fails.

Now while it is important to notice the inconsistency correctly, it is also important to notice precisely what, in pointing it out, one has succeeded in doing. One has only shown that one cannot consistently assert (1) and go on to assert (2), one has not shown (and this must be emphasized because the opposite can easily be supposed) that one cannot consistently assert (1). On the contrary one can, and if someone wanted to assert it, he could, perhaps, be accused of ignoring the facts or of committing himself to undesirable consequences, but he could not be accused of being inconsistent.

## **Part II**

Why did Descartes commit the error involved in his dream argument? Possibly he just failed to notice it, but though this may be true enough, I think one can point out good reasons why he

should have failed to notice it, reasons relating to the purposes for which he uses it in *Meditation* I. It is to an examination of these that I now wish to turn.

It is Descartes' intention in *Meditation* I to overthrow the existing foundations of knowledge. I think one must describe his intention like that, and not say, for instance, that it is to show the existing foundations are inadequate, because Descartes does not just want to question the foundations, but actually to remove them from his and his readers' minds, so that he and they will be free to accept the new ones Descartes wishes to put in their place. This is clear enough from the way he speaks about *Meditation* I within that *Meditation* and elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> and also from his well-known advice to his readers to spend some months in reading it. As Kenny has rightly remarked, the doubt is "a meditative technique, a form of thought therapy"<sup>6</sup> and as Gilson observes, *Meditation* I is "not a theory to understand, but an exercise to practice,"<sup>7</sup> thereby correctly drawing attention to the fact that it has as much in common with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, used by Descartes' Jesuit teachers, as with treatises written by philosophers. The purpose of the doubt is to rid the mind of false beliefs and their inadequate foundations, so that it will be free to accept new, certain foundations and true beliefs that are true because founded on them.

Given that this is so, and that it is the senses that were the foundations of the philosophy of the day (as Descartes notes in the *Discourse*),<sup>8</sup> what Descartes needs is arguments that will remove that acceptance of the senses. The dream argument does serve this function if one takes it as sound, as many, including Descartes, seem to have done. But it is not sound, or rather only

---

<sup>5</sup> One may refer here in particular to the analogy with building given in reply to the seventh objections, Descartes, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 325-326, which is also used in the *Discourse*, vol. 1, p. 89

<sup>6</sup> A. Kenny, *Descartes* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> E. Gilson, *Etudes sur le role de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système Cartésien* (Paris Vrin, 1951) p. 186. Quoted by E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1978), p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Descartes, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 104.

part of it is sound (at least to the extent it is not inconsistent), and the question arises as to whether it would serve the same function if this part alone, namely part (1), were presented. The answer must be no, for then the result would be that ‘waking’ and ‘dreaming’ were synonymous terms, not that waking experiences might be illusory. Such a conclusion will not remove from the mind its confidence in the senses; what it will do is put the mind in the same disposition towards both dreaming and waking, and make it ready to accept or reject them when there is reason to do one or the other. The dream argument itself gives no such reason. As this result is not what Descartes wants for his purpose, it helps to explain why he should not have been interested in an argument that only led to this result, and why he should have wanted to go further, though in doing so he fell unavoidably into inconsistency.

There is, however, a deeper reason, related to what he does in the immediately succeeding paragraphs, why Descartes needs to have the full dream argument with its conclusion that our experiences are illusory. He goes on to suggest that, supposing all our waking experiences are “false delusions,” it still does not follow that they are altogether false, for what they represent contains true elements, just as dreams, though illusory, contain true elements: dreams are like paintings which, though imaginary, take their elements from real life. It is important to note that there is here an exactly similar fallacy as in the dream argument proper. To show that waking experiences may be illusory, Descartes had to use the proposition that dreams are illusory when he was no longer in a position to do so; and to show that waking experiences, though illusory, still represent something real, he has to assume the proposition that dreams represent something real when he is equally no longer able to do so. We know that dreams contain elements that represent what is real (as eyes, head and hands) because we are able to refer to our waking experiences as a contrasting and true set of experiences in order to persuade

ourselves of this, but as dreaming and waking are not, in the context, contrasting terms, this can no longer be done. But why did Descartes compound his error like this, especially as the passage does not seem very relevant? It does not advance the primary skeptical intention of the *Meditation* since no more skeptical arguments are introduced until the argument from an omnipotent God several lines later, and, moreover, since the effect of it is not to remove confidence in the senses but actually, in some measure, to restore it. However, Descartes does, it seems to me, have good reasons for what he is doing at this point, for he achieves in particular three things, which advance his purpose in another way.

The first is that he introduces the notion of a representative theory of perception. It is insinuated into the reader's mind that if perception is of anything real, it is so, not because we perceive real things directly, but because we perceive them indirectly, by perceiving images that represent something real. A representative theory of perception is not only part of Descartes' developed philosophy; it is vital to that philosophy in the way it lays the foundations for his physics. Descartes must suppose perception is representative because he contends that only the mathematical properties in material things are real, the sensible properties are not in things but in the mind only. But if we perceived things directly (as was generally supposed in the philosophy of his day), this could not be true for things would have the sensible properties we perceive in them just as much as the mathematical ones. That we do not perceive external things immediately but only ideas in the mind is taken for granted throughout the rest of the *Meditations*, but it is nowhere argued for (for instance, in *Meditation* III Descartes says that what he had come to doubt was not that he had perceptions in his mind but that there were things outside him from which they proceeded and to which they were entirely similar).<sup>9</sup> The only argument is here in *Meditation* I, which relies on the analogy with dreams, but as has been

shown, this argument is fallacious.

The second point is that the parts of our experience that Descartes lists as being real are all mathematical properties; sensible ones are passed over in silence. No argument is given for this discrimination, though of course it is a cardinal contention of Cartesian physics. The third point follows from this, namely that the mathematical sciences (geometry and arithmetic) are superior to the other sciences, for they are not overthrown by the skeptical arguments given so far. Even if our waking experiences are illusions yet the mathematical properties in them are real, and it is with these that geometry and arithmetic deal. Thus is insinuated into the reader's mind Descartes' hierarchy of the sciences, and the foundation is laid for his later claim that a physics, astronomy and medicine based on mathematics would be superior to those sciences not founded on mathematics, such as was the case in his own day. Although he does present a further skeptical argument for doubting the truths of mathematics, yet this doubt does not remove the hierarchy he has set up; even if doubtful, like everything else before the discovery of the cogito, mathematics is far less doubtful than other things.

These three contentions are all dependent, in the way Descartes presents them, on the conclusion of the dream argument. We can thus see that this conclusion is being used not merely to overthrow trust in the senses, but in such a way that any reader who goes along with Descartes up to this point will already have started to believe central Cartesian doctrines, doctrines that only explicitly emerge later. The reader is being prepared, or softened up, so to speak, for what is to follow, and while ostensibly he is only being given arguments to make him reject existing beliefs (beliefs typical of the philosophy of the day), in fact he is being induced, at the same time, and by virtue of the very same arguments, to replace those beliefs with quite different ones, and ones that are typically Cartesian.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 158

Further remarks on these same lines could be made about *Meditation* I and would further reveal the cleverness of its construction. The point to emphasize, however, is simply this: *Meditation* I is so put together that he who assents to the arguments in it has thereby assented to certain principal beliefs of Cartesian physics without necessarily realizing it. That Descartes knew that he was doing this is attested to by what he says in a letter to Mersenne:

Between you and me, I shall tell you that these six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics. But please, one must not say this; for those who favor Aristotle would perhaps make more difficulty about approving them. I hope that my readers will imperceptibly become accustomed to my principles, and will recognize their truth before they realize that they destroy Aristotle's principles.<sup>10</sup>

In view of this it is not surprising that he should urge his readers to meditate on *Meditation* I for several months, for whoever does this and lets the ideas in it sink deeply into his mind (as Jesuits by practicing the *Spiritual Exercises* let the ideas in that sink deeply into their minds) will already have advanced a considerable distance towards becoming a Cartesian, in particular with respect to physics, and one must not forget that it is his physics that Descartes considers to be of most importance and which he most wants to promote.

Descartes then clearly intended that more should be present in the *Meditations*, between the lines as it were, than is obvious on the surface, and that more should go on in his readers' minds as a result than they would immediately be aware of. I suggest that what is going on here in *Meditation* I in the use of the dream argument is part of this overall intention.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, A. Kenny ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 94. Quoted by Curley, who investigates this assertion of Descartes' in detail, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-234.