**Is Reality a Dream?**

An Analysis of Descartes’s Dream Argument

Throughout history, countless intellectuals have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of knowledge. These pursuits, however, lacked a foundation for knowledge that would shield them from doubt. Descartes’s Meditations aim to conjoin certainty with knowledge in the natural sciences. The skeptics argued that knowledge is impossible, so Descartes boldly started with their arguments so as to refute them. His evil demon argument abolishes the intellect as a reliable foundation. The dream argument undermines sense perception as a mean to acquire knowledge. This essay will clarify that argument, analyze it, elaborate upon its implications, and ultimately provide refutations from Hume, Locke, and myself with Descartian responses.

The basis of the dream argument is the fact that we perceive dreams as reality. Dreams, whilst experienced, are believed to be waking life. It is only upon waking up that we realize those experience were actually mental hallucinations. This is because there exist no marks that differentiate dreams from reality. In the words of Descartes, “There are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep.” Since we can’t differentiate between the two states, we could be dreaming at any moment. So, at any moment, our perceptions may be false. Therefore, sense perception is not a reliable foundation for knowledge.

To exemplify this, take in your present surroundings. Everything you’re perceiving is possible to perceive in a dream. Every fathomable conscious experience can be fathomably experienced in a dream. The two states are sufficiently similar to the extent that dreamers are regularly deceived into believing they are experiencing reality. Besides the rare exception of lucid dreams, we don’t realize we’re dreaming while we’re dreaming. This is because there are no distinguishable marks to differentiate the two states. The content of dreams is based upon that of reality, so there are no blatant indications of dreaming. There’s nothing that can happen in reality that can’t happen in a dream. As a result, we can never be certain that we are not dreaming.

The meditator considers this himself and takes in his present surroundings. He ponders, “How often have I dreamt that I was in these familiar circumstances, that I was dressed, and occupied this place by the fire, when I was lying undressed in bed? At the present moment, however, I certainly look upon this paper with eyes wide awake; the head which I now move is not asleep; I extend this hand consciously and with express purpose, and I perceive it; the occurrences in sleep are not so distinct as all this. But I cannot forget that, at other times I have been deceived in sleep by similar illusions.” Although his present surroundings appear to be real, they would similarly seem to be real in a dream. He thinks he is awake, but that is also what he would think if he were dreaming. In the end, the meditator is left perplexed as to whether or not he is currently dreaming.

The structure of the argument is as follows:

Premise 1: dreams are often mistaken for reality. Premise 2: dreams are not a reliable foundation for knowledge because they are mental hallucinations. Premise 3: there are no distinguishable marks to differentiate the two states. Conclusion: we could actually be asleep when we think we’re awake. Implication: sense perception is an unreliable foundation for knowledge

This argument is radically contentious. It contradicts a ubiquitous assumption, that we know when we are awake – that reality is real. This is common sense! Accordingly, countless philosophers have argued against it.

The weakest part of the argument is premise 2 - that there are no distinguishable marks between the two states. If even a single experience in reality could absolutely not be experienced in the dream state then, in that moment at least, one could be certain they are awake. To refute the dream argument, several philosophers have claimed such a distinguishable mark.

John Locke believed that physical pain cannot be felt in dreams. Emotional pain is possible - nightmares are scary - but it is impossible for a dreamer to experience physical agony. However, this claim is unsubstantiated. Merely, Locke himself has never experienced pain while sleeping. This doesn’t necessarily mean that nobody can or that it is impossible to.

 David Hume proclaimed that while dreams can be absurd, reality is always practical. So we can know if we are awake by identifying the lack of absurdity. The dream state is indeed susceptible to preposterous events, but we don’t recognize them as such in the moment. Regardless of how ludicrous a dream becomes, they are always believed to be waking life. Their absurdity doesn't faze the dreamer’s perception, so the two states are still qualitatively indistinguishable.

The following is my refutation:

Unarguably, everyone has had dreams that they thought were reality at the time. This is because we don’t comprehend that we are dreaming while we are dreaming. However, the opposite is false. We all understand that we are awake while awake. The only time we might think reality is a dream is if we are chronically sleep deprived or on copious amounts of hallucinogens. Humans can easily distinguish reality from dreams, but can only distinguish dreams from reality upon waking up.

  We can see a table in our dreams that’s identical to a table in our house. In our dream, we would think that table is real. Upon waking up, we would realize that it was a mental projection and then go have breakfast on the real table. In our conscious minds, we can distinguish the real table from the one in our dreams. There is no chance of dreaming something that doesn’t exist. Since the dream state doesn’t cross into reality, our ability to perceive mental projections in dreams does not inhibit or confuse our ability to perceive the world with our senses.

  Humans know when they’re awake. We don’t always know when we are dreaming, but upon waking up we can always tell the difference. Therefore, the two mental states are distinguishable.

Descartes would respond:

Humans don't always know when they're awake. This is an extremely rare situation only possible under unlikely circumstances, such as sleep deprivation or after the copious hallucinogenic administration, but it's still a reason to doubt that argument. Unfortunately, any reason for doubt, no matter how meager, is sufficient to render knowledge uncertain.

In the moment where the dream feels completely real, when we haven't yet woken up, what happens in the dream is qualitatively indistinguishable from what happens when we are awake. Since the two states are qualitatively indistinguishable, we should worry about the claim that we can have knowledge of a difference between them - that we can't distinguish between them from our first-person-perspective. So we can’t be confident that we are awake even if it seems like we know that we are awake. It is impossible to tell the difference between that state and a qualitatively indistinguishable dream state. Therefore, we can't ever be certain we’re awake.

The mere possibility of confusion is sufficient for a valid conclusion. The dream state can be mistaken for reality, which means that we can’t accept every feeling of reality as veridical. Since there’s always a chance that we’re in a dream state, we have to doubt reality.

Every belief has a foundation, but amongst humanity these foundations tend to be brittle. Since all it takes is a weak foundation for the entire building to collapse, humanities callous attitude towards acquiring knowledge needs to be eliminated. Certainty and belief should go hand in hand, and Descartes has provided a way to make this so. The first step, the one of focus here, is to eradicate every improper assumption. Most beliefs are justified by the senses, but sense perception is deceitful. It can’t be trusted because the dream state and reality are indistinguishable. There is no experience in waking life that can’t be realistically simulated in dreams. Vice versa, we can have a dream in which we ask ourselves if we are awake and say, “Yes! I am definitely awake.” So, the possibility always exists that knowledge acquired via sense perception is actually of the dream state. This would render it dubious. Therefore, perceptual experience is an unreliable means of knowledge acquisition.

The most unique trait of Homo sapiens is intelligence. However, humans are not as intelligent as they purport to be. Descartes’ skepticism arguments have revealed that the way we acquire most our knowledge is unreliable. Thankfully, he laid a path towards attaining knowledge that is conjoined with certainty. For that, humanity will be eternally grateful.