

In Meditation I of *Meditations on First Philosophy* French Philosopher René Descartes calls into doubt all of his current metaphysical and epistemological convictions. According to Descartes, belief systems resemble somewhat of an edifice, with any individual opinion containing only as much certainty as the ‘pillar’ belief that rests underneath it. In order to obtain an impermeable system of beliefs, Descartes weaponizes a reductive method of radical doubt to question all of his inherited fundamental beliefs in search for a certain foundation that will ultimately serve as the basis for reconstruction. As a starting point, Descartes endeavors to place doubt upon sensory experience. A central feature of this argument is that dreams provide a sufficient basis to doubt our sensory perceptions as accurate accounts of reality. In the ensuing sections, I will lay out Descartes' dream argument and ultimately contend that it remains logically resilient in the face of scrutiny.

The Dream Argument:

P1: If I cannot with certainty distinguish between a dream state and an awake state, then sensory experience cannot provide indubitable knowledge of the external world.

P2: I cannot with certainty distinguish between a dream state and an awake state

C: Sensory experience cannot provide indubitable knowledge of the external world.

P1: While we may not rely on the senses to obtain fundamental knowledge such as corporeal nature, mathematics, and other a priori concepts, sensory experience is indeed essential to our understanding of how these simple ideas manifest in the material world. If Descartes is to really know something certain about this material, external world, then he must know that this thing is merely not the product of an illusion. After all, illusions are not real, so if Descartes is to know that he is really “sitting by the fire,” he must be certain this is not a dream. Put differently, if we

can not with certainty distinguish a dream state from an awake state, then we cannot with certainty rule out the possibility that we are dreaming at any or all times.

P2: The second premise of Descartes' dream argument, perhaps the more controversial of the two, contends that there are "no sure signs" to distinguish a dream state from an awake state. According to Descartes, dreams are capable of, and often are just as vivid and distinct as their awake counterpart. As a consequence, whether awake or asleep, we can be, and often are, equally convinced of the reality of that state. Descartes does not make a point to argue that dreams *always* resemble awake states, just that they at least some of the time do. That is, while dreams can sometimes be absurd and hazy, they on other occasions can be just as coherent and vivid as an awake state; dreams are protean and we can thus never be sure we are not dreaming.

On Skepticism:

When broken down into its component parts, we see Descartes' dream argument shares a very similar form with his subsequent 'evil deceiver' argument and modern-day simulation arguments; since we can not with certainty know that we are not in a dream, being deceived, or in a simulation, then we can not be certain of anything.

Despite what our greatest intuitions may tell us, the logic behind skeptical arguments of this kind is rather impenetrable. If we accept Descartes' "certainty" condition for true knowledge, then any justifying evidence provided for knowledge, particularly that related to the external world, can always be subject to skepticism through an appeal to illusion. That is, skepticism necessarily forbids us from using the only criteria capable of proving the veridicality of our external world.

For example, if I were to question whether or not all my memories have actually taken place, simply stating “I remember them vividly and distinctly” would not suffice as it is precisely this act of remembering that is being doubted. Put differently, we can not test the accuracy of a radar gun using itself, and so we cannot prove the veridicality of certain sensory experiences through an appeal to an external world that is perceived through these very senses.

On Dream Skepticism:

Along with its allowance of a priori knowledge, a key difference between the dream hypothesis and simulation/deceiver arguments is that it at least allows for a comparison between real and fake states. While I cannot compare a simulated reality to the simulator’s reality, for example, we can at least separately characterize dream and awake states even if we cannot always distinguish them with certainty; to discuss any transition between the states necessitates this. Predictably this opens the door for Cartesian opponents to argue that dreams are in fact not protean, and that there are certain features of awake states that cannot be replicated in dream states. For example, one may argue that certain degrees of pain or high levels of coherence with certainty indicate that we are awake. While such claims are anecdotally and scientifically dubious at best, even if we concede to the opposition that awake states do have distinct phenomenal qualities, we still fall victim to skepticism. For one thing, the skeptic can feasibly argue that this is not actually the difference between reality and a dream, but merely the difference between a dream and *a dream of a dream*. Perhaps less conceptually exhausting, the skeptic can simply argue that knowing which state we are in provides no guidance as to which is reality and which is illusion. That is, if I am equally convinced of the viscerality of my experiences when in either state, I can never know which of my sensory perceptions reflect the certainty that Descartes is in pursuit of.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite legitimate questions as to the protean nature of dreams, cogent Cartesian arguments can still be made that all life may be a dream. However, when one actually considers this scenario only then does she realize that its implications are of no consequence. No matter what, all of life is real, in some sense. If we one day realize that our universe is simulated or a dream, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist, we were just mistaken about its nature.