

# Dream argument

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The **dream argument** is the postulation that the act of dreaming provides preliminary evidence that the senses we trust to distinguish reality from illusion should not be fully trusted, and therefore any state that is dependent on our senses should at the very least be carefully examined and rigorously tested to determine whether it is in fact reality.

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## Synopsis

While people dream, they usually do not realize they are dreaming (if they do, it is called a lucid dream). This has led philosophers to wonder whether one could actually be dreaming constantly, instead of being in waking reality (or at least that one cannot be certain, at any given point in time, that one is not dreaming).

In the West, this philosophical puzzle was referred to by Plato (*Theaetetus* 158b-d) and Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1011a6). Having received serious attention in René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the dream argument has become one of the most prominent skeptical hypotheses which clearly has an archetype in elements of Plato's Allegory of the Cave also.

This type of argument is well known as "Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly" (莊周夢蝶 *Zhuāngzhōu mèng dié*): One night, Zhuangzi (369 BC) dreamed that he was a carefree butterfly, flying happily. After he woke up, he wondered how he could determine whether he was Zhuangzi who had just finished dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who had just started dreaming he was Zhuangzi. This was a metaphor for what he referred to as a "great dream":

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman - how dense! Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too. Words like these will be labeled the Supreme Swindle. Yet, after ten thousand generations, a great sage may appear who will know their meaning, and it will still be as though he appeared with astonishing speed.<sup>[1]</sup>

One of the first philosophers to posit the dream argument formally was the Yogachara Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu (fl. 4th to 5th century C.E.) in his 'Twenty verses on appearance only'. The dream argument features widely in Mahayana Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist thought.

Some schools of thought in Buddhism (e.g., Dzogchen), consider *perceived reality* 'literally' unreal. As a prominent contemporary teacher, Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, puts it: "In a real sense, all the visions that we see in our lifetime are like a big dream [...]"<sup>[2]</sup> In this context, the term 'visions' denotes not only visual perceptions, but appearances

perceived through all senses, including sounds, smells, tastes and tactile sensations, and operations on received mental objects.

## Simulated reality

Dreaming provides a springboard for those who question whether our own reality may be an illusion. The ability of the mind to be tricked into believing a mentally generated world is the "real world" means at least one variety of simulated reality is a common, even nightly event.<sup>[3]</sup>

Those who argue that the world is not simulated must concede that the mind—at least the sleeping mind—is not itself an entirely reliable mechanism for attempting to differentiate reality from illusion.<sup>[4]</sup>

“ Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once. ”

— René Descartes<sup>[5]</sup>

## Critical discussion

In the past, philosophers John Locke and Thomas Hobbes have separately attempted to refute Descartes's account of the dream argument. Locke claimed that pain in dreams is not of the same intensity as pain in reality. Various scientific studies conducted in the late 20th century provided evidence against Locke's claim by concluding that pain in dreams can accurately mirror pain in waking life. Hobbes's refutation claimed that dreams are susceptible to absurdity while the waking life is not.<sup>[6]</sup>

Many contemporary philosophers have attempted to refute dream skepticism in detail (see, e.g., Stone (1984)).<sup>[7]</sup> Perhaps most notably, Ernest Sosa (2007) has devoted a chapter of a recent monograph to the topic. There, Sosa presents a new theory of dreaming and argues that his theory raises a new argument for skepticism, which he attempts to refute. In *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*, he states: "in dreaming we do not really believe; we only make-believe."<sup>[8]</sup> Jonathan Ichikawa (2008) and Nathan Ballantyne & Ian Evans (2010) have offered critiques of Sosa's proposed solution. Ichikawa argued that as we cannot tell whether our beliefs in waking life are truly beliefs and not imaginings, like in a dream, we are still not able to tell whether we are awake or dreaming.

## Popular culture

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice finds the Red King asleep in the grass; Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell her that the Red King is dreaming about her, and that if he were to wake up she would "go out—bang!—just like a candle..." A similar theme is explored in *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, told from the perspective of the dreamer in his own realm of dreams.

In the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, machines imprison the human race and plug them into "the Matrix", an enormous machine system that uses human bioelectricity and body heat as a biological battery to power the machines. Connected to the Matrix, the humans are kept in a dream-like state, in which they dream of being in the world as it is today; they have no reason to suspect that it is anything other than the real world. Certain people sense the innate artificiality of the illusion and, through various means, "wake up", breaking free of the Matrix. The overall theme of the series is the "waking dream" scenario, and speculations on which reality is preferable. This concept is further explored during the second Matrix film where one of the main characters appears to be able to utilize abilities usually used in the "dream" in what the character currently believes is "reality", leaving the viewer to question if the character is in fact in reality, or if they are still inside the dream.

In the original television series *The Twilight Zone*, the episode *Shadow Play* (written by Charles Beaumont, originally aired May 5, 1961, Season 2, Episode 26) concerns a man trapped in a recurring nightmare in which he dreams he is a prison inmate sentenced to death and to be executed; he tries to convince the characters in his dream that they are only figments of his imagination and that they will cease to exist if the execution is carried out.

In the *Star Trek Deep Space Nine* episode *Far Beyond the Stars*, after losing a close colleague in the Dominion War, Captain Sisko confides in his father about leaving Starfleet. Sisko suddenly experiences visions that he is an African-American named Benny Russell who lives in 1950's America and writes stories for a science-fiction pulp magazine. Inspired by a drawing of a space station, Benny writes a story about a Captain Sisko set on *Deep Space Nine* in a future where the racial prejudices of the period no longer exist. Benny then faces backlash from the publishers who refuse to run a story about a black Captain resulting in Benny suffering a nervous breakdown. The episode left it ambiguous whether Sisko's life in the 24th century is real or the result of imagination combined with mental illness.

Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* deals mostly with this subject, revolving around a man being aware of having been trapped inside his own dream.

In the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode *Normal Again*, Buffy is poisoned by a demon, causing her to flash between her life as usually portrayed on the series and another reality, where she has been in a mental institution for 6 years for believing the original reality. The viewer and Buffy herself are presented with uncertainty as to which reality is the hallucination; Buffy even mentions that she was institutionalized after she saw her first vampire and wonders whether she might have been hallucinating a life with exciting, supernatural elements since then. (Her psychologist discusses how Buffy had snapped back to "reality" for a few months, corresponding to the period when Buffy the Vampire Slayer was dead in the show's usual narrative.) The non-supernatural world has both her parents alive and together. Both realities appear completely plausible, in a paradox of sorts. She opts for the world with no vampires or other supernatural beings, as her life as a Slayer is full of pain and grief. However, when her mother tells her she is strong and capable, she returns to her "Slayer" reality. The last scene shows her sitting in the mental institution, in a vegetative state and hallucinating her life as a Slayer.

Christopher Nolan's movie *Inception* deals with the fictional science of shared dreaming. The characters enter others' minds, to steal ideas, or in the rare case of inception itself, plant them while the target is unaware they are dreaming. Once in a dream, the characters can enter other layers or dreams within dreams. In the movie, characters can distinguish a dream by using totems, unique items whose properties and behavior are different in a dream than in the waking world. In the end, the film leaves open the question of whether the protagonist is himself dreaming.

Films such as *Total Recall*, based on a story by Piers Anthony, and *Blade Runner*, based on a story by Philip K. Dick, also hinge upon the idea that what you remember and perceive is not always real.

*Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* greatly explores the protagonist Raiden's (and by extension, the player's) diminished sense of reality, and that what you perceive may not be what is truly reality.

Ted Dekker's Circle Series protagonist wakes up in an alternate reality every time he goes to sleep.

Doctor Who explores the idea of the dream argument many times. In the ninth episode of series four "Forest of the Dead", the Doctor's companion Donna is "saved" into the Library's harddrive and begins to live out an imaginary and fake reality; unaware that the reality she is living in an illusion until a disfigured woman who had been killed in the "real" world and respectively submitted into the hard drive convinces her that her life is not real. In the seventh episode of series five *Amy's Choice* the two companions of the Doctor, Amy and Rory Pond, have to decide between two realities; one where they are happily married and the other where they are still travelling with the Doctor, and the only way to escape is to kill yourself in the fake reality. Since they are not sure which one is fake and which is real, they are hesitant to choose. In the Christmas special of 2014 *Last Christmas*, this concept is once again used where an alien species latches onto your brain to devour it, but makes you dream so you are unaware while they digest. Similar to *Inception*, it explores the ideas of shared dreaming and the main characters question whether they're awake or still in a dream. The Doctor points out there are multiple ways to determine the answer, such as asking questions that you do not know the answer to, having different people read the same book and discover that the text is different, or even the appearance of fictional characters, such as Santa Claus.

## See also

- Cartesian doubt
- Consensus reality
- Evil demon
- False awakening

- Maya (illusion)
- Multiverse
- Reality in Buddhism
- Social simulation
- Solipsism

## Notes

1. 莊子, 齊物論, 12. *Zhuàngzi*, "Discussion on making all things equal," 12. *from Zhuàngzi*, Burton Watson trans., *Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 43. ISBN 978-0-231-10595-8 [1] (<http://books.google.com/books?id=f1BvUUUVRLEC&lpg=PP1&pg=PA43#v=onepage&q&f=false>)
2. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu *Dream Yoga And The Practice Of Natural Light* Edited and introduced by Michael Katz, Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, NY, ISBN 1-55939-007-7, pp. 42, 46, 48, 96, 105.
3. *Joseph Barbera, Henry Moller, Dreaming, Virtual Reality, and Presence* ([http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=bttg3B5CZOIC&oi=fnd&pg=PA96&dq=dreaming+simulated+reality&ots=iPQG-evOVr&sig=\\_7NT\\_42ES4XXK8iXz02Necg5W9c#PPA103,M1](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=bttg3B5CZOIC&oi=fnd&pg=PA96&dq=dreaming+simulated+reality&ots=iPQG-evOVr&sig=_7NT_42ES4XXK8iXz02Necg5W9c#PPA103,M1)).
4. *Giuliana A. L. Mazzoni and Elizabeth F. Loftus, When Dreams Become Reality* ([http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?\\_ob=ArticleURL&\\_udi=B6WD0-45MGTWX-N&\\_user=10&\\_rdoc=1&\\_fmt=&\\_orig=search&\\_sort=d&view=c&\\_acct=C000050221&\\_version=1&\\_urlVersion=0&\\_userid=10&md5=23fdaaef820b1ccd4be0982568286789](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6WD0-45MGTWX-N&_user=10&_rdoc=1&_fmt=&_orig=search&_sort=d&view=c&_acct=C000050221&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=10&md5=23fdaaef820b1ccd4be0982568286789)).
5. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfbits/dm1.pdf>).
6. "Dreaming, Philosophy of – Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy". *utm.edu*.
7. Stone, Jim (1984). "Dreaming and Certainty" (PDF). *Philosophical Studies* **45** (3): 353–368. doi:10.1007/BF00355443.
8. Sosa, Ernest (2007). *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-929702-3.

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