

11-1-2005

## Dreams and Skeptics

Ernest Sosa

*Brown University and Rutgers University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex)

 Part of the [Epistemology Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Sosa, Ernest (2005) "Dreams and Skeptics," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: [http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil\\_ex/vol35/iss1/2](http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol35/iss1/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).



The College at  
**BROCKPORT**  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



*Ernest Sosa*

## Dreams and Skeptics<sup>1</sup>

Ernest Sosa

### I

Our knowledge is said to have “sources” such as perception, memory, and inference, which issue “deliverances” that we may or may not accept. Our senses may issue the deliverance about two adjacent lines that one is longer, for example, a deliverance rejected by those in the know about the Müller-Lyer illusion.

A deliverance of  $\langle p \rangle$  to a subject S is a “saying” that p, one witnessed by S. Different sources correlate with different ways in which it may be said that p. Someone may say it literally, of course, in person or in writing, and S may hear it or read it. If we can believe our eyes or ears, moreover, it’s because they tell us things. We experience visually or aurally as if p. Normally we accept such deliverances of our senses, unless we detect something untoward. When someone or something tells us that p, we normally know who or what is doing so. We can tell at least that a certain voice or a certain stretch of writing is doing so. We can tell that we seem to see the bells toll, or seem rather to hear them toll. And so on.

Deliverances thus conceived make up a realm of the ostensible: ostensible perceptions, ostensible memories, ostensible conclusions, ostensible intuitions, and the like. We may or may not believe our eyes or ears, we may or may not trust our senses, or our memory, or our calculations or other reasonings.

In virtue of a subject’s constitution and positioning vis-à-vis a fact  $\langle p \rangle$ , and of the subject matter or field of that fact, a deliverance to that subject will or will not be “safe.” It is such factors, that is to say, which determine whether or not  $\langle p \rangle$  would be so delivered to S only if it were true. A subject in possession of the concept of a headache would ostensibly introspect that he suffered a headache only if he did, and this deliverance of introspection would thereby attain outright safety.

A concept of dependent safety may now be introduced by stages as follows. First would come a kind of relativized conditional:

*Relative to  $\langle r \rangle$ , it would be so that p only if it were so that q*

defined as follows:

$\langle r \& p \rangle$  would be so only if  $\langle q \rangle$  were so.

In terms of this we could then define more complex conceptions of safety:

*Relativized safety.* One's belief that *p* is safe *relative to a fact*  $\langle r \rangle$  IFF relative to fact  $\langle r \rangle$ , one would believe  $\langle p \rangle$  only if it were so that *p*.

*Dependent safety.* One's belief that *p* is safe *dependently on a fact*  $\langle r \rangle$  IFF (a) one's belief that *p* is not safe outright (i.e., it is not so that one would believe that *p* only if it were so that *p*), but (b) one's belief that *p* is safe relative to fact  $\langle r \rangle$ .

A deliverance's being safe in virtue of certain conditions must now be distinguished from its being safe *dependently* on those conditions. Thus I may now enjoy a safe appearance as if there is no loud noise in my presence in virtue of the facts that I am not deaf, that my ears are not plugged, and so on, but not dependently on those facts, since my present ostensible perception of there being no such noise is safe outright; and since it is safe outright it is not *dependently* safe. My auditory appearance is safe in virtue of my ears being operative: were they inoperative I would be unable to detect the presence or absence of loud noises. It may be thought that if this is so, then my auditory appearance that silence envelops me cannot really be safe outright; it must then be safe only dependently on my ears being operative. But this is not so. My auditory appearance can be safe outright in virtue of the holding of a certain contingent condition, so long as the condition's absence is a remote enough possibility (in the relevant context of thought or discussion), remote enough that it would not in fact obtain in the circumstances, though of course conceivably it might.

Examples of deliverances are test results, indicator readings, eyewitness reports, media reports, perceptual appearances, and even rational intuitions and ostensible conclusions. Contents are delivered by each such source. Acceptance of a deliverance as such, i.e., based on the reason that it is such a deliverance, constitutes knowledge only if the source is in that instance trustworthy and its deliverance accepted with appropriate guidance. The deliverance must be safe, and one must be so attuned to the trustworthiness of its source that one would accept its deliverances as such (for the reason that they are such deliverances) only if they were safe.

It would not be enough to require that source *X*'s deliverances merely guide *S* to believe the contents thus delivered. It must be required rather that *X*'s deliverances guide *S* to accept those deliverances as such. *S* must accept the contents thus delivered as such, and this accepting must be guided by the deliverances (and guided also by the factors dependently on which those deliverances are safe). Reason: What the absence of the deliverance would

properly take away is its content's being accepted for the reason that it is thus delivered, on the basis of the deliverance; after all, that content itself might then be a deliverance of some other source, in which case it would not be renounced merely because the first deliverance was rejected. Moreover, if a source delivers a deliverance but that source is now untrustworthy, then, if appropriately responsive to its untrustworthiness, S will now modify his attitudes accordingly. How so? Not necessarily through no longer assenting to the deliverances of that source. For, again, what that source delivers may concurrently be delivered by a source known to S to be perfectly trustworthy, in which case S would hardly give up believing the content delivered just in virtue of being responsive to how untrustworthy the earlier source is in the circumstances. What such responsiveness will affect is rather S's attitude to that untrustworthy source's deliverances as such: i.e., S will no longer assent to that source's deliverance, say  $\langle p \rangle$ , as a deliverance of that source. S will no longer accept  $\langle p \rangle$  for the reason that it is a deliverance of that source, i.e., on that causal basis. S will no longer be guided to accept those deliverances at face value, i.e., as deliverances of that source. (Your eyesight might fade while your hearing remains good; and you might then respond accordingly.)

As for the notion of "guiding," this will here be understood as nothing more than the converse of "basing": Factor F "guides" belief B if and only if belief B is "based" on F (perhaps in combination with other factors).

Again, deliverances are not beliefs or acceptances. Perceptual experience delivers that one of the Müller-Lyer lines is longer than the other despite the fact that all things considered one has no temptation to accept that deliverance and believe accordingly. Any competence to be guided by a trustworthy source of deliverances is an intellectual virtue (or has a virtue as its basis in the constitution of that subject's mind).

That sketches a safety-through-virtue view in a way that applies naturally to familiar sorts of examples. Thus, a bird-watcher forming beliefs normally may be seen to be favored over unfortunates such as an "accidental clock-gazer" and an "observer through a fleetingly transparent VCR/window," as follows. In all three cases the subject accepts a deliverance as such, but only the normal bird-watcher accepts it with proper guidance. He would accept deliverances of his source only were they safely trustworthy. Not so for the unfortunates: the accidental clock-gazer, or the observer graced by fleeting transparency. Deliverances accepted by these unfortunates are not safe outright. What is more, they are not even safe dependently on factors that guide their accepting. One might of course know something through accepting a deliverance that is safe not outright but dependently on a certain condition. If one accepts such a deliverance guided by the holding of the relevant condition, one might still know the truth of the content accepted. Thus a clock that works for brief

seconds might still yield safe deliverances relative to its ticking. The subject who accepts its deliverances guided (at least in part) by its ticking might learn thereby what time it is, even if one who believes the clock without hearing it tick would not share that knowledge. The difference is that the clock does then issue safe deliverances concerning the time, dependently on its ticking. Therefore the subject who accepts its deliverances guided by its ticking can know thereby. However, the subject who is not guided by its ticking, who would believe even if the clock were stopped, may not know through accepting the clock's reading, and would not know thereby unless the clock's readings are safe dependently on some other factor that does guide the subject.

The subject who knows of the bird's flight accepts a deliverance that is safe either outright or else dependently on a condition that guides his acceptance, but the subject who reads the accidentally working clock fails to know thereby because the deliverance he accepts is safe neither outright, nor dependently on any condition that then guides him. And the same goes for the subject who accepts his ostensible perceptions when accidentally allowed a true view through a fleetingly transparent window that as often as not is just a deceptive VCR.

A deliverance enables knowledge, then, only if it is safe either outright or else dependently on a condition by which one is guided. One then knows through accepting that deliverance guided in part by the holding of that condition.

Our sort of requirement, going from a psychological state with a certain content to the truth of that content, may thus be used to define a desirable cognitive status for states other than belief, for "deliverances." These may now be viewed as "indications" when they satisfy our unary requirement. Thus a deliverance/indication  $I(p)$  may be said to "indicate" outright that  $p$  IFF  $I(p) \rightarrow p$ ; and to indicate that  $p$  "dependently on condition  $C$ " IFF both  $C$  obtains and  $C \& I(p) \rightarrow p$ , while it is not so that  $I(p) \rightarrow p$ . (A "deliverance," an instance of delivering, is a state of affairs wherein something seems to oneself to be so—a more or less complex state that may feature intellectual as well as sensory content.)

The foregoing enables us to take account of externalist intuitions as follows.

S knows that  $p$  on the basis of an indication  $I(p)$  only if either (a)  $I(p)$  indicates the truth outright and S accepts that indication as such outright, or (b) for some condition  $C$ ,  $I(p)$  indicates the truth dependently on  $C$  and S accepts that indication as such not outright but guided by  $C$  (so that S accepts the indication as such on the basis of  $C$ ).<sup>2</sup>

How is this affected by examples like the following?

1. Consider the propositional form  $x + y = z$ , where  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  are all 2-digit numbers (in the usual formulations. And suppose that  $S$  believes and would believe any proposition he takes to be of form  $F$ , simply because it is such a proposition. Some of these propositions will be true: the proposition that  $22 + 22 = 44$ , for example; call it  $P1$ . Consider  $S$ 's belief of  $P1$ .  $S$  has an inclination to believe it, and does appear to have an indication, namely  $F(P1)$ , of the truth of  $P1$ . After all, it is true and true outright that  $F(P1) \rightarrow P1$ .  $S$  accepts that indication, guided by the fact that the proposition accepted is of form  $F$ . So the effective indication is  $F(P1)$ , where  $P1$  is presented as a proposition of form  $F$ . This indication/deliverance (to  $S$ ) does, again, apparently indicate the truth. Moreover,  $S$  does accept that indication/deliverance as such, i.e., for the reason that it is such an indication/deliverance. Why then is it that  $S$  fails to know  $P1$ , if that is how he acquires and sustains his belief?

2. On my way to the elevator I release a trash bag down the chute from my high-rise condo. Presumably I know my bag will soon be in the basement, and I know in the elevator that the bag is already there. But what if it were not there? That presumably would be because it was snagged somehow in the chute on the way down (an incredibly rare occurrence), or through some such happenstance. But none such could affect my belief as I descend in the elevator, so I would still believe that the bag was in the basement. My belief is not sensitive, therefore, but constitutes knowledge anyhow, and can correctly be said to do so. Such "backtracking" conditionals create problems for the "sensitivity" requirement that  $S$  knows that  $p$  only if  $S$  would not believe that  $p$  if it were false.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the "indications" account, in terms of an indication/fact conditional:  $I(p) \rightarrow p$ , seems unaffected.

Consider a "principle of exclusion" as follows:

PE In order to know a fact  $P$  one must exclude (rule out, know to be false) every alternative that one knows to be incompatible with one's knowing that fact.

Plausible enough already on its face, this also follows directly from simple principles that are hard to deny, or so I have argued elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Let us briefly explore its epistemological implications.

Our principle invokes a distinctive conception of "alternatives": when you believe  $\langle p \rangle$ , such an alternative  $\langle a \rangle$  is a condition within which you would not know that  $p$ . If  $\langle a \rangle$  is incompatible with  $\langle p \rangle$  then  $\langle a \rangle$  is a condition within which you would not know that  $p$ , but  $\langle a \rangle$  can also be incompatible with your knowing that  $p$  without being incompatible with  $\langle p \rangle$ . Here now are some relevant examples, some involving alternatives in a narrower sense, some only in the broader sense.

1. You see a striped equine and thereby believe you see a zebra. But stripes could be painted on a mule so it would look the same, which makes this an alternative.
2. You ostensibly see a hand and accept that at face value. But if you were a demon victim or an envatted brain (etc.) you would not know. So your being in such a skeptical scenario is an alternative.
3. You ostensibly see a sphere and accept that at face value. But if it were a cube it would not be a sphere, and you would not know it to be a sphere you see. So its being a cube is an alternative.

You might defend your belief in case 3 by saying that the very experience indicating to you that you see a sphere indicates also that it's a noncube. And someone might argue: "If it were a cube it would look different, so I can know through my experience that it's a sphere, not a cube, since my experience would reveal the difference." Unfortunately, such reasoning would invoke a problematic criterion of sensitivity, since our experience would not thus reveal the difference between one's being or not being in familiar skeptical scenarios, nor would it even reveal whether or not one is wrong in thinking that *p*, etc. If we are to defend your case-3 belief in a conditionals-theoretic way, therefore, we should look to the requirement of safety, not that of sensitivity. Our belief that the item is a noncube (and the corresponding visual indication guiding that belief) is indeed found to be not only sensitive but also safe; as is the belief that no demon is fooling us into thinking that it's a sphere and not a cube; and as is the simpler belief that we are not wrong in thinking it to be a sphere and not a cube. So far so good.

Consider case 1. Advocates of safety say this: if you think you see a zebra, then you know only if your belief is safe: i.e., it must be that you would so believe only if your belief were true. What if its being a painted mule is pressed on you as an alternative? Would you offer a response analogous to the safety-inspired response in case 3? Are the corresponding beliefs in these cases relevantly alike? Is our belief that it's a sphere and not a cube relevantly like the belief that it's a zebra and not a striped mule? In respect of sensitivity there are bound to be important differences: if it were a cube and not a sphere, then one's visual experience would be different; but if it were a striped mule and not a zebra, then (by hypothesis) our experience would still be the same. In order to deal with this, without having to grant that we can't know it's a zebra when we see one at the zoo, the sensitivity theorist sometimes invokes the difference between relevant and irrelevant alternatives. He does not require us to rule out that it's

a striped mule we see, even though we still would not believe the equine to be a striped mule even if it were a striped mule, and not a zebra. Obviously, in the case as imagined, we are not in a position to rule out with sensitivity the alternative that it's a striped mule we see. The appeal to relevance is designed to exempt us from having to rule out precisely such alternatives, which are viewed as irrelevant. And the same goes for the more radical alternatives of the skeptics, as in case 2. Some sensitivity theorists also adopt a linguistic contextualism which puts aside the question of who can know what and in what conditions, in order to concentrate rather on when it is correct to say that someone "knows." And this is thought to be powerfully affected by what alternatives are somehow salient in the context of attribution.

The safety theorist has no need of that linguistic recourse. Nor does he even need the distinction between the relevant and the irrelevant. He will point out rather about case 3 that even if it were a cube it might conceivably look like a sphere. In the right circumstances it might look spherical despite being cubical. So we are depending rather on a condition that if it were cubical then it would in fact look cubical and not spherical. The corresponding safety requirement is then that if it looked spherical it would in fact be a sphere and not a cube (even if it might conceivably look spherical and yet be a cube). Put another way, the safety requirement is satisfied so long as not easily would it then look like a sphere while failing to be one (given the actual set-up).<sup>5</sup>

That works plausibly enough for outré skeptical scenarios of brain-entangling scientists or deceiving demons. But the case of dreams proves more troublesome. Too easily might one be just dreaming when one has a visual experience as if *p*, which seems to show that too easily one might be experiencing as if *p* without it being so that *p*. The deliverance of one's visual experience is in that case not safe, not an indication after all. The remainder of this paper will focus on this particularly problematic skeptical problem, the problem of dreams.

## II

At any given time nearly all of one's beliefs remain latent. Few if any are manifest in consciousness. A belief might be manifest upon being formed, when one makes up one's mind. Or it might rise to consciousness from storage. To manifest one's belief thus in consciousness is to judge or to assent or to avow consciously, at least in *foro interno*. The same is true of one's intentions, few of which rise to consciousness at any given time for assent or avowal.

One might assent to a proposition, moreover, or to a course of action, while lacking the corresponding belief or intention, or even while believing or intending the opposite. Actions speak louder than words; louder than conscious assentings, too, as with deep-seated prejudices that survive conscious disavowal.

For convenience, let's use 'affirmation' for assentings to propositions and 'volition' for assentings to courses of action (including simple actions as a limiting case). In these terms, we can now ask: How do beliefs/affirmations and intentions/volitions figure in dreams? Do dreams have the psychological depth required for the presence of beliefs and intentions? Do the characters in one's dreams have beliefs and intentions? Plausibly they do, myself included as protagonist or spectator in my dreams. As protagonist or spectator in my dream, I would seem to enjoy conscious experiences. And I would seem also to assent consciously, to make affirmations and volitions. These are made in the dream, of course, where one also hosts beliefs and intentions, and enjoys experiences.

When in my dream,  $p$ -or, for short,  $Dp$ , reality tends not to follow suit, so that in actuality, not- $p$ -that is,  $A\sim p$ ? When in my dream I am chased by a lion, that poses no danger to my skin. This independence of dreams from reality is what the skeptic needs. Ironically, it also endangers his reasoning. Take physical propositions,  $p$ , about the layout of the physical world around us. For no such proposition does  $Dp$  entail  $Ap$ . What about mental propositions,  $m$ , about how it is in one's own mind? Does  $Dm$  entail  $Am$ ? No, even if in my dream I believe that a lion is after me, and even if in my dream I intend to keep running as long as it is still after me, in actuality I have no such belief or intention.

What about mental propositions,  $c$ , about one's current conscious states, whether conscious experiences or conscious assentings? Does  $Dc$  entail  $Ac$ ? Consider, for example, a conscious assenting to a course of action of one's own, a volition. If in my dream I make a volition, do I also in actuality make that volition? Suppose in a dream one succumbs willingly to a temptress, indeed to a neighbor's wife turned in the dream into a sultry object of desire. Does one then violate the Biblical injunction against coveting one's neighbor's wife? Indeed, does one go even further? Does one then consciously assent to the sinful act? If so, does one deserve discredit, even censure? If one has sinned not only in one's dream, but in actuality, at least in one's heart, it is hard to see how one could escape discredit. That has near-zero plausibility, however, about as little as does assigning discredit to a storyteller/protagonist for his misdeeds in a story spun for a child. (One might blame him for telling such a story to such an audience, but that is different; one does not thereby blame him for doing what he does in the story.)

One might try to circumvent this through appeal to the unusual circumstances. Although in dreaming one does actually assent to misdeeds, perhaps even to evil deeds, perhaps its being just a dream protects one from discredit? This seems wholly implausible. Why should the circumstance of its being a dream have that effect? If sudden paralysis renders one unable to carry out one's deplorable intentions, this does not protect one from discredit, or from the full weight of the Biblical injunction. How then can we be protected by the relevant disengagement of one's brain from the physical causal order? And

how then can we gain protection through disengagement of one's inner mental life, as in a dream?

It seems wholly preferable to think of dreams on the model of daydreams, or imaginings, or stories, all fictions of a sort, or quasi-fictions. The fact that in one's dream one is in a certain mental state hence should not be thought to entail that in actuality one is in that state, not even when the state is one of mentally assenting to a course of action of one's own, of making a volition. By parity of reasoning, what is true of volitions seems equally true of affirmations, moreover, of mental assentings to propositions.

What then of experiences, conscious sensory experiences? What of mental propositions, e, about one's current conscious sensory experiences? Does De entail Ae? Here at least, it may be thought, we can plausibly draw the line. But consider the consequences. It is now supposed that in respect of such experiences it is just as if a lion is after me. Yet I form neither the belief that this is so nor the intention to escape. Am I not now deserving of discredit? Is it not irrational of me to host such experiences without the appropriate beliefs and intentions?

Here one might of course dig in one's heels, saying that the dream experiences are real enough, unlike the beliefs and intendings, and even the affirmations and volitions. But we are not irrational in failing to form obviously appropriate beliefs, since being in a dream state disables us, just as would being tied down in a chair so that one cannot act in obviously appropriate ways. But this seems strangely arbitrary. Why are the experiences real but the assentings unreal? They seem on a par in the dream. Again it seems best to reject the move from "In my dream I experience, visually and aurally, as if a lion is after me" to "In actuality I experience thus."

If we do think of dreams on the model of fiction, moreover, this highlights a fact that seems obvious enough in any case. Dreaming that p does not entail thinking that p, at least not in the sense of affirming that p, mentally assenting. And if one does manage both to dream that p while concurrently affirming that p (which seems hard enough to do, perhaps impossible), still the dreaming and the affirming must be kept apart as distinct occurrences, either of which might have occurred without the other.

Let us next consider what effect this line of thought may have on the traditional skeptical argument from dreams. Here is a formulation:

1. My reason for now thinking, as I do, that I see a fire, is that I experience as if I see a fire.
2. But this might all be so only in a dream, in which case I would see no fire (at least not thereby).
3. Yet I have no basis to rule out the possibility that it all be

so only in a dream.

4. For my basis would have to reside in my experience and it is precisely the import of this basis that is in question through the possibility that I experience thus only in a dream.

It might be replied that this goes wrong already with the first step, that if I do think I see a fire and base this on an experience, none of this can be happening only in a dream. For we have seen that *Dm* does not imply *Am*, that one's dreaming that one is in a certain mental state does not imply that one is actually in that mental state. And the same goes for one's dreaming that one undergoes a linked set of such states. Suppose I were dreaming that I base on a present experience my thought that I see a fire. Then I would not thereby think I see a fire based on my present experience. Indeed, if it were a dream, as specified, then it would be an open question (at best) whether I then do base a thought that I see a fire on an experience as if I see a fire, and it would even be an open question (at best) whether I so much as have any such thought or any such experience.

It might even be held that one's dreaming as specified rules out, whether metaphysically or nomologically, the possibility that one actually have at that same time any such thoughts or experiences. This suggests that traditional formulations of such skeptical reasoning, Descartes's included, may not go deep enough. For such a dream argument puts in question not only our supposed perceptual knowledge but even our supposed introspective knowledge, our supposed takings of the given. It puts in question not only our supposed knowledge that we see a fire, but even our supposed knowledge that we think we see a fire, or experience as if we see a fire. How so?

Suppose I (introspectively) think that I think I see a fire. Might it not be just a dream? Might I not thereby be dreaming that I think I see a fire? And if I am thereby dreaming that I think I see a fire, then perhaps I do not really think I see a fire, after all.

But hold on. If I really think that I think I see a fire, then I cannot thereby be dreaming that I think I see a fire. That is at least so, as remarked earlier, on the understanding of 'thinking' as '(conscious) affirming'. Don't we thus secure privileged access after all, protection from the possibility that it be just a dream?

Fair enough. But compare now the case where I think I see a fire. If I really think that, then here again I cannot thereby be dreaming that I see a fire. So, we seem to have equally privileged access to the fact that we see a fire, at least equally privileged in respect of protection from the dream argument.

We may accordingly retreat to a thinner, less committed, concept of thinking, where even dreaming and imagining are themselves forms of "thinking." On the thicker notion of thinking, if I imagine that *p*, hypothesize that *p*, or dream that *p*, it is not the case that I thereby think that *p*; I may then not even

think that *p* at all, and may even think that not-*p*, perhaps even consciously, at least in that same specious present. On the thinner notion of thinking, by contrast, in imagining that *p* one thereby does think that *p*. And the same is now true of dreaming. On the thinner notion, in dreaming that *p*, one does thereby think that *p*. More idiomatically, we should perhaps say rather that in thus dreaming or imagining that *p*, one has or at least entertains the thought that *p*. So, “thinking that *p*” in the weaker sense would amount to “having or at least entertaining the thought that *p*.”

Now we do have a kind of privileged access to a part or aspect of our mental life. For in the thinner sense of ‘thinking’ it is now true that if I think that I think then I must be right, even if in thinking that I then think, I am thereby dreaming. Or, in the longer but more idiomatic formulation: If I have the (meta-) thought that I have a thought, then I must be right, my (meta-)thought must be true, even if in having that (meta-)thought I am only dreaming.

Despite our having attained such privilege, we are now in an epistemological dead end. For the conscious episode thus privileged, thus protected from falsehood, is not of a sort that could constitute knowledge. Imagining, daydreaming, storytelling—these are not the stuff of knowledge. Such episodes can have truth-evaluable propositional content, true enough. The problem is rather that the propositional attitudes involved are not of a sort to constitute knowledge, are not those of main interest in epistemology. True, one might have the thought that *p* by affirming that *p*. So, a case in which one has the thought that *p* may be a case of knowledge. But this knowledge would be constituted not just by the having of the thought, but by the affirming. Having the thought that *p*, which might derive simply from one’s imagining that *p*, is not then the locus of knowledge. But it is only this state that is privileged by the Cartesian argument, the state of having the thought that one has a thought. It is only this thin, determinable state that is dream-proof, since even if one were dreaming that *p*, one would still be having the thought that *p* (in the sense in which the narrator has the thought that there was an old lady who lived in a shoe, without affirming that there ever was anyone like that). But this dream-proof state is not a state that can constitute knowledge. The knowledge-constituting state would have to be that of affirming that *p*, of thinking, in the thicker sense, that *p*. Anyhow, this would be the state constitutive of conscious knowledge that *p*.

Uncowed, a Cartesian might now insist that the *cogito* need not be restricted to weak, thin thinking. It can go beyond the fact that one could not possibly have the thought that one has a thought without being right. It can reason rather more thickly that one could not affirm that one affirms something, without being right. So, we can after all mount a *cogito*-style defense of a state that can constitute conscious knowledge, namely the state of consciously assenting, of affirming.

Yes, but how successful is this defense against the dream argument? What of the possibility that right now one might just be dreaming, in which case one would be affirming nothing? How does one circumvent this possibility?

Compare the thinner reasoning, about one's having the thought that one has a thought. This is also a self-verifying (thin) thought. But it has in addition something missing from the stronger *cogito*-style reasoning, about one's affirming that one affirms something: namely, being dream-proof. Suppose one faces the possibility that one now is only dreaming. This would mean that one is really affirming nothing. But it would not mean that one is not having the thought that one is having a thought.

So, my present thought that I am having a thought is not only guaranteed to be right; it is also one I would not seem to have without having it, not even if I were dreaming. Compare my right now affirming that I am affirming something. This too is guaranteed to be right. But, unlike the thinner thought, it could appear to be thought, without really being thought. If I were just dreaming now, then I would be dreaming that I was affirming that I am affirming something. But I would not be affirming anything at all. So things would in a way seem subjectively just as they do now, if it was a realistic enough dream. But I would just be having thoughts, without really thinking in the thicker sense, without affirming anything.

The Cartesian might protest that the advantage of the *cogito* emerges through a practical syllogism. One reasons that one would be guaranteed to be right in assenting to it, and one aims at truth, so one can now assent to the *cogito* as a conclusion of a practical syllogism (supposing that no conflicting value now defeats one's aiming at the truth). But this does not help with our problem. For, if one is dreaming, then one cannot really be going through any such reasoning. One is only dreaming that one is doing so. So things could seem just as they do now, indistinguishably, and yet one would not have the basis that apparently justifies one now in assenting to the conclusion of one's supposed practical reasoning. Therefore, it cannot be such reasoning that is giving one justification for assenting to the *cogito*. To suppose that such reasoning is nevertheless giving us our justification for thus assenting, is to stamp one's foot with the claim that even if one could not tell the difference between one's present state and the dream state of apparent practical reasoning, nevertheless the mere fact that one is reasoning practically, if one is, suffices to provide one with the required justification. But many would see this as an unacceptable begging of the question against the dream argument.

The Cartesian might here dig in his heels somewhat deeper. He might say that we do not need the stronger protection enjoyed only by thin thought. Despite the apparent question-begging, the protection enjoyed by thick thought is quite enough to secure Cartesian, *cogito*-style knowledge against the skeptic. But consider the fact that if one sees that here is a fire, then one

must be right: it must be that here indeed is a fire. What advantage then does the *cogito* have over such perceptual knowledge (by which I mean, here and in what follows, the thick *cogito*). In each case there is a state, one involving a propositional content <p> such that if one is in that state, then one's state is guaranteed to be "right" in that it is guaranteed to be so that p. What advantage does the *cogito* now enjoy over one's seeing that p? Why say that the *cogito* is privileged? In each case one can seem to be in the state without being in the state, since in each case one might just be dreaming that one is in the state. And in each case, if one is in the state, then the propositional content of the state is true, so being in the state guarantees that the state is in that sense right. What then distinguishes the *cogito*, so as to make it especially privileged, with a status not shared by simply seeing that p? Maybe an answer is possible. But it would be nice to see one that is actual.<sup>6</sup>

Brown University and Rutgers University

### Notes

- 1 This paper draws on an account of animal knowledge, developed in earlier publications, in terms of a sort of tracking that replaces sensitivity (if it had not been true that p, the S would not have believed it) with safety (S would have believed it only if true) and adds a requirement that this safety must itself derive not accidentally but from the exercise of epistemic virtue. Here that account will eventually confront a special problem posed by one skeptical scenario in particular, that of dreaming, which is in important respects more virulent than more outré scenarios such as that of the envatted brain or the evil demon.
- 2 To qualify as not only necessary but also sufficient our condition would need to be modified so as to require that the guiding indication be "fundamental" for that subject at that time: i.e., not based on a deeper, more general indication. (Also we would need to take into account the requirement that one's belief be so guided *virtuously*; and considerations of perspective must also be given their due.)

<sup>3</sup> This sort of problem is also presented by Jonathan Vogel in "Tracking, Closure, and Inductive Knowledge," in S. Luper-Foy, ed., *The Possibility of Knowledge* (Rowman&Littlefield, 1987), and is endorsed by Stewart Cohen in his "Contextualist Solutions to Epistemological Problems: Skepticism, Gettier, and the Lottery," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76 (1998): 289-306.

<sup>4</sup> "How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes," *Philosophical Studies* LXXXV (1997): 229-49.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning the zebra we should distinguish between a case where the animal seen might too easily be a striped mule: where, for example, that zoo might too easily, and maybe does already, display striped mules instead of zebras. In such a situation clearly one does not know it to be really a zebra one sees. The safety requirement explains this through the fact that even if it looked like a zebra, and one believed accordingly, it might too easily be not a zebra but a striped mule. So far so good. But what if the zoo in question is incorruptible, and would never descend to such deceit. Now the safety requirement seems satisfied, and we are able to say that one knows it to be a zebra one sees. Or, at least one can say that as far as the safety requirement is concerned. The safety requirement is after all just a necessary condition. So the mere fact that a belief satisfies that requirement does not commit us to counting it a case of knowledge. On the contrary, whether or not one knows in such a case will plausibly depend also on why it is that one believes as one does. And here one must look to the "habit" of thought that leads from the perceived look to the corresponding classification. Why does one base one's belief that it's a zebra on that look?

<sup>6</sup> In forthcoming work I hope to lay out a more positive response to this more powerful dream skepticism, with its indictment of the *cogito*.