
Skepticism and Internalism

HALVOR NORDBY
Lillehammer University College
Faculty of Health and Social work
2626 Lillehammer
NORWAY

and

University of Oslo
Department of Health Management and Health Economics
0317 Oslo
NORWAY

I Introduction

The skeptical Dream argument appeals to the possibility of dreaming. The skeptic holds that states of being awake are subjectively indistinguishable from possible dream states and that this means that we do not know that we are awake. This, the skeptic then claims, means that we have to accept that we do not have external world knowledge.

It is natural to assume that there must be a connection between the Dream argument and epistemic internalism, the view that a belief is justified for a given person if and only if the person has cognitive access to all the factors that are needed for the belief to be justified. The problem, the skeptic thinks, is that in order for my belief that I am awake to be justified I have to have cognitive access to something that establishes that I am awake. But according to the skeptic, even if I am awake, this is not something I have cognitive access to. However, the more precise connections between internalism and the skeptical argument are not so clear. The ideas of cognitive transparency and cognitive access have been understood in different ways, and epistemological internalism

has often been discussed in philosophical contexts that are not directly relevant for the Dream argument.¹

One possible strategy for showing that the skeptic presupposes a more robust idea of epistemic internalism is to start out with various attempts to elucidate the requirement of cognitive access and then seek to understand which alternative, if any, the Dream argument invokes. This would obviously require a comprehensive analysis. A less complex strategy for understanding how internalism is relevant in the context of the Dream argument is to start with the argument and then clarify the internalist assumptions it makes.

The aim of this article is to locate an internalist assumption implicit in the Dream argument, and then use this assumption as a basis for an objection to the argument. This objection will not be an attempt to provide an independent argument against epistemic internalism. Such attempts have been made, but no argument has received widespread acceptance among philosophers.² I will argue that there is a greater possibility of using the internalist assumption in a convincing objection to the Dream argument if one focuses on the coherence of the argument. As with arguments against versions of internalism, there is no incoherence argument against the Dream argument that many philosophers have thought of as convincing. But incoherence arguments have not focused on epistemic internalism as I will do here.³ I will argue that the premise of the argument that links the possibility of dreaming to the claim that I do not know that I am awake is plausible only if a version of internalism is correct. I will then argue that in order for the initial premise about the possibility of dreaming to be plausible the same version of internalism has to be rejected.

-
- 1 Epistemological internalism must be distinguished from internalism about mental content, the view that only facts about a person considered in isolation from his environment determine the content of his mental states (Burge 1979). Epistemological internalism must also be distinguished from the 'transparency of sameness of content,' the idea that if we have two thoughts with the same content, then it is transparent to us that the thoughts have the same content (Kripke 1980, Boghossian 1994).
 - 2 See for instance Sosa (1994) and Hill (1996). An influential argument for the conclusion that the concept of internalism and the concept of knowledge are essentially connected, can be found in Stroud (1994). See also Stroud (1989).
 - 3 In recent years, 'contextualist' objections to the skeptical argument have received much attention (Dretske 1981, Lewis 1996, Schiffer 1996, DeRose 1995). These objections seek to show that the premises and the conclusion of the skeptical argument are incoherent in the sense that they do not have the same truth-values in 'philosophical' and 'everyday' contexts.

The reason why the first premise has to reject the relevant idea of epistemic internalism is, I will argue, that the relation between the initial premise and our ordinary beliefs about what it is to dream is not merely conceptual: on the basis of an interpretation of the argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction I will argue that it is possible to understand the first premise but be agnostic about its truth. If one thinks that the first premise is plausible, then that is because one has beliefs about what it is to dream and be awake that provide reasons for accepting it. The problem for the skeptic is that as long as he has to accept that I can have these beliefs in a dream, he is also forced to accept that the internalistic condition of justification presupposed by the second step of his argument is violated.

The paper ends by showing that the skeptic cannot avoid this objection by rephrasing his argument. Any version of the Dream argument must in some way appeal to the subjective indistinguishability between the state of being awake and possible dream states, and then link this to the claim that we do not know that we are awake. But then the incoherence objection I will develop applies.

II The Dream argument

Descartes wrote:

How often has it happened to me in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed! At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it; what happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this. But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions, and in dwelling carefully on this reflection I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep. (Descartes 1955, 145-6)

The skeptical argument based on the possibility of dreaming has commonly been understood in the following way:

- (P1) Conscious mental states I am in when I am awake are subjectively indistinguishable from conscious mental states I can be in while dreaming.
- (P2) If (P1), then I do not know that I am not dreaming.
- (P3) If I do not know that I am not dreaming, then I do not know anything about the external world.

(C) I do not know anything about the external world.

I assume that it is clear how a similar argument can be formulated on the basis of the well-known brain-in-a-vat hypothesis (Putnam 1981, Brueckner 1994). For the sake of simplicity I will focus on the possibility of dreaming, and I will think of the above argument as the Dream argument.⁴

The first premise of the Dream argument is sometimes formulated as 'It is possible that I am dreaming.' But this sentence is false if one understands it as a metaphysical proposition (Kripke 1980): either I am dreaming or I am not. If I am dreaming then it is impossible that I am awake, and if I am awake it is impossible that I am dreaming. In discussions of skepticism, the sentence 'It is possible that I am dreaming' should obviously be understood in an epistemological sense. It is intended to capture the idea that I cannot tell whether I am dreaming or awake since the two states are subjectively indistinguishable. When the first step of the skeptic's reasoning is formulated as (P1) above, it becomes clearer that this is the crucial idea.

An initial comment should also be made about the use of the term 'conscious' in the formulation of the Dream argument. It might be suggested that someone who is dreaming cannot be in a conscious state, but merely in a state that seems to be conscious.⁵ This is not, obviously, the understanding of 'conscious' that is employed in the first premise of the Dream argument. What 'conscious' in (P1) intends to capture is the seems-like-I-am-awake experience that we have when we are awake and that we can have in a dream. I will assume that this is a use of 'conscious' that will be sufficiently precise for the argumentative purposes here.

In the last part of this paper I will discuss different ways of formulating the steps of the skeptic's reasoning. Until then I will focus on the above formulation and assume that it is reasonably clear.

4 Skepticism that is not based on the possibility of hallucination falls outside the scope of this article. One kind is Pyrrhonian skepticism — skepticism 'without theory' (Williams 1988).

5 Evans (1982) holds that one cannot have singular thoughts about fictional objects, and Wittgenstein (1969) claims that utterances made when one is dreaming are meaningless. This understanding of a conceptual representation with truth-conditions is not, obviously, the understanding that the skeptic has. In this paper I will, at least for the sake of argument, accept that we can have thoughts when we are dreaming. The objection that will be developed here is not targeted at this assumption.

III Strategies for refuting the Dream argument

In discussions of the Dream argument, most philosophers have accepted that the premises have an immediate appeal or, at least, that they are not obviously false. That is why the skeptical argument has been thought of as constituting a problem. It is not the skeptic who has to justify the premises of the argument. The burden of proof lies with us; a satisfactory response to the argument has not been found until we are able to explain why the premises are implausible despite their immediate appeal (Wright 1991, DeRose 1995, Schiffer 1996).

This task can be addressed in two ways. One strategy is to raise an objection to one premise in isolation from the rest of the argument. Another is to focus on the coherence of the premises and the conclusion of the argument. The objection that will be developed here is an incoherence objection, and the focus will be exclusively on the two first premises of the argument. More specifically, I believe that the objection falls under a general strategy outlined by Barry Stroud when he connects the task of refuting skepticism to the task of answering the question of how we can have knowledge of the external world without taking such knowledge for granted. Addressing this question Stroud writes as follows:

I think its source lies somewhere within the familiar and powerful line of thinking by which all of our alleged knowledge of the world gets even temporarily split off all at once from what we get in perception, so we are presented with a completely general question of how perception so understood gives us knowledge of anything at all in the physical world. If that manoeuvre cannot really be carried out successfully, we have no completely general question about our knowledge of the world to answer. (Stroud 1994, 306)

Stroud thinks that if refuting skepticism is a matter of explaining how we can have knowledge of the external world from a 'detached' position where we do not presuppose that we have such knowledge, then it seems overwhelmingly difficult to refute skepticism. It might therefore, according to Stroud, be more promising to ask whether we really can get into the 'detached' position. Stroud has not, however, explored this strategy in detail himself, but only presented it as a strategy for refuting skepticism that he thinks deserves more attention than it has received.

The objection to the skeptical argument that will be developed below attempts to explain why we cannot get into a position that the second premise of the Dream argument requires.⁶ The key to seeing why this is

⁶ In his discussion of the 'traditional epistemological project' Stroud is not explicitly

so, I will argue, is to be found in internalist assumptions about justification that the second premise has to make in order to be plausible.

IV Epistemic internalism

A classical formulation of epistemic internalism is Bonjour's characterization of internalism as the denial of the view that a person can have a reason for accepting what Bonjour thinks of as a 'basic' belief even though he does not have 'any cognitive grasp of any kind of this reason or of the relation that is the basis for it in order for this basic belief to be justified; all these matters may be entirely external to the person's subjective conception of the situation' (Bonjour 1980, 55). In recent years it has become more common to give a positive characterization of internalism and then define externalism as the denial of internalism (Chisholm 1977, Dancy 1985, Hill 1996, DeRose 1999). Gibbons has defined externalism as the view that 'the warrant or justification for a belief does not supervene on introspectively accessible properties of the believer' (Gibbons 1996, 288). Bonjour has more recently held that 'a theory of justification is internalist if and only if it requires that all of the factors that are needed for a belief to be justified for a given person be cognitively accessible to that person' (Bonjour 1992, 133).

When discussing epistemic internalism and externalism philosophers have sometimes used definitions of these positions without offering very explicit explanations of the terms involved. If the aim is to understand how internalism is relevant for the status of the premises of the Dream argument, a definition that is not properly elucidated can obviously be inappropriate. Consider, for instance, the internalist requirement that a person has to have 'cognitive access' to what provides justification. As Bonjour has pointed out, exactly what a person has cognitive access to is left open (Bonjour 1992). One possibility is that cognitive access includes access to objects and events in the external world, another is that we do not have such access. The latter interpretation is clearly the one that the Dream argument requires. As stated above, (P2) claims that if conscious mental states I am in when I am awake are subjectively indistinguishable from possible dream states, then I do not

concerned with the Dream argument or any other skeptical argument, but there is obviously a close connection: the Dream argument is also an attempt to reach a general conclusion about external world knowledge on the basis of ordinary conceptions of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream. The skeptic wants to show us that we are, on the basis of our straightforward beliefs about possible cases of hallucination, forced to accept the general skeptical conclusion.

know that I am awake. The skeptic thinks that the facts referred to in the antecedent undermine my claim that I know that I am awake. The problem, the skeptic holds, is that this claim does not represent knowledge since I am not justified in believing that I am awake.

I will assume that the skeptic's reason for holding that my belief that I am awake is unjustified is as follows: suppose that I am asked to justify my belief that I am awake. If I am unfamiliar with philosophical discussions of skepticism I will perhaps say something like this: I know that I am awake since I can see that there is a computer in front of me, and since I am typing on that computer right now. The skeptic replies that there may very well be a computer in front of me. But he thinks that (P1) of his argument means that facts about my environment are not directly accessible to me. He claims that since I do not have direct access to such facts, they cannot provide the justification for my belief that I am awake that the belief needs in order to constitute knowledge.

Part of the reason why this is reasonable, the skeptic claims, is that there is something I have direct access to, namely my own conscious mental states. Presumably, if there was nothing that I had direct access to, then the claim that justification must be provided by something that I have direct cognitive access to would be too demanding. But a crucial point, according to the skeptic, is precisely that I have direct access to my conscious mental states.

It is natural to assume that for those who are inclined to think that the premises of the Dream argument have an immediate appeal, the claim that my justification for my belief that I am awake must be grounded in my conscious mental states falls under a more general idea of rationality. An internalist is likely to hold that to accept a belief is to think of it as true, and that this presupposes that I am aware of a reason for thinking that my belief that I am awake is true: I have, in reality, no reason for thinking that my belief is true unless I am aware of such a reason. It is reasonable to suppose that the skeptic appeals to this idea when he claims that facts about my environment cannot justify my belief that I am awake.

So what if I instead suggest that I know that I am awake because I am in a state that has qualitative properties that are idiosyncratic to being awake? The skeptic agrees that I have direct access to my conscious states and their qualitative properties. The problem, the skeptic claims, is that there are no qualitative properties of conscious states that are idiosyncratic to being awake. The skeptic claims that no matter what property I focus on, I have to accept that a dream state can have the same property. I might have, for instance, the sense impression that there is a computer in front of me, but the skeptic claims that I have to accept that I can have the same impression in a dream, that it can be just as vivid and strong. And the skeptic holds that the intense feeling of be-

ing awake, the special ‘irreducible’ property one is likely to appeal to, is a property that I must accept that a dream state can have.

When we conceive of the skeptic’s reasoning in this way, the skeptic agrees that the world around me might be as I think it is. The problem, the skeptic holds, is that I do not have cognitive access to the external world. In this sense he first restricts the scope of justification for my claim that I am awake to conscious mental states. The skeptic then makes a further restriction. He claims that my justification for my belief that I am awake must be provided by conscious mental states that have qualitative properties that dream states cannot have. Therefore, the second premise of the Dream argument seems to presuppose the following version of epistemic internalism:

Transparency of justification (TJ): My justification for the belief that I am awake must be transparent in the sense that it must be provided by conscious mental states that have qualitative properties that dream states cannot have.

According to the skeptic, the problem is that there are no conscious states that meet this condition. It is therefore, the skeptic holds, not transparent to me that I am awake. But in order for my belief that I am awake to be justified and constitute knowledge it has to be transparent to me that I am awake.

The fact that (TJ) represents the version of epistemic internalism that is relevant for the Dream argument explains why it was important to distinguish between epistemic internalism as a general thesis and the special internalist assumptions that the Dream argument makes. A person who is unspoiled by philosophical training and challenged to justify a belief that there is a red object in front of him would perhaps find it natural to appeal to a sense impression of a red object that he has, and in this sense give an internalistic justification. But it is possible to have a sense impression of a red object in a dream, so this is not the concept of an internalist justification that the Dream argument invokes. For the skeptic, the crucial idea is the idea of a conscious state that has properties that are idiosyncratic to being awake. The Dream argument is internalistic in the sense that it presupposes that the justification that my belief that I am awake needs in order to constitute knowledge must be provided by such a state.

V The internalist assumption generalized

(TJ) focuses on the belief that I am awake. A global version of (TJ), the view that all beliefs and other propositional attitudes must be justified transparently in the sense specified by (TJ), is implausible for an obvi-

ous reason. Consider the thought that I am now thinking a thought. If the global version were correct, this thought would have to be justified by a conscious state that has properties that dream states cannot have. But there are no such states according to the skeptic. However, the idea that I do not know that I am now thinking a thought is implausible; we seem to know what we are consciously thinking. Furthermore, and as noted above, rejecting the idea that we know what we are consciously thinking undermines the coherence of the skeptical argument. The argument concludes that we do not have knowledge of the external world, but it needs to presuppose that we know what we are consciously thinking.

I assume, therefore, that the skeptic can give independent reasons for why his idea of transparent justification in (P2) does not generalize to all propositional attitudes. But this does not mean that he is free to claim that (TJ) does not generalize at all. Suppose that the skeptic holds that the belief that I am awake is the only belief that must be justified transparently in the relevant sense. This particularistic version would be just as implausible as the global version. If the belief that I am awake needs to be justified transparently, then some other beliefs must be justified in the same way. To hold that the belief that I am awake is the only belief that requires transparent justification is manifestly *ad hoc*. So, assuming that the skeptic must hold that some other beliefs must be justified transparently as well, what we can do is to ask how the internalist assumption generalizes.

We have already excluded self-evident Cartesian *cogito* thoughts. As I pointed out above, the skeptic can provide independent reasons for excluding such thoughts from propositional attitudes that must be justified in the way he claims my belief that I am awake must be justified. And the skeptic must, at any rate, hold that the belief that I am awake is crucially different from self-evident thoughts: if it is evident to us that we are awake, then either (P1) or (P2) should strike us as obviously false. But this, I have assumed, is not the case. The fact that my belief that I am awake is not self-evident constitutes a good reason for holding that the skeptic is not committed to including self-evident thoughts among the propositional attitudes that have to be justified transparently.

Is the belief that I am awake then an empirical belief, a belief that must be justified on the basis of empirical investigations of the external world? There is an obvious reason why it is not: if it is, then (P1) cannot undermine my claim that I know that I am awake. According to the Dream argument, the reason I have to accept that I do not know that I am awake is not that some particular fact about the world around me establishes this. It is because (P1) is true that I do not know that I am awake, and (P1) is a claim about the qualitative character of my conscious mental states, not the external world around me. This does not

mean that the skeptic has to hold that empirical beliefs do not have to be justified transparently. The point is that (P2) does not have implications for how empirical beliefs have to be justified. It is neutral with respect to this.

If we exclude self-evident and empirical beliefs from the beliefs that (P2) implies have to be justified transparently in the sense specified by (TJ), it is possible to formulate a more comprehensive but not entirely global version of (TJ) that it seems reasonable to assume that the skeptic has to accept:

(TJ)-generalized: the justification for a belief that is neither self-evident nor empirical must be transparent, in the sense that it must be provided by conscious mental states that have qualitative properties that dream states cannot have.

My intention has not been to argue that the second premise of the Dream argument actually implies that (TJ)-generalized is true. The important point is that a particularistic version of internalism is implausible, and that (TJ)-generalized seems to be a reasonable formulation of the more general version of internalism that the skeptic has to accept. The important consequence of this is that if the skeptic claims that the acceptance of (TJ) does not commit him to accepting (TJ)-generalized, then he owes us an explanation of why this is so. In other words, if the plausibility of the Dream argument depends on the skeptic not having to accept (TJ)-generalized, then we have achieved the fundamental aim I have assumed that we should attempt to achieve when trying to refute the skeptic: the burden of proof would no longer lie with us, it would be the skeptic who needs to explain why the Dream argument is plausible despite its immediate appeal.

I will not here attempt to argue that (TJ)-generalized is false. Quite a few arguments against various versions of epistemic internalism have been presented, but many externalists have not been persuaded by these arguments. I will instead use (TJ)-generalized as a basis for an incoherence objection to the Dream argument. If we can show that (P1) is plausible only if we reject (TJ)-generalized, then we have shown that the skeptic faces the problem of explaining how both (P1) and (P2) can be plausible.

VI (P1) is not self-evident

The skeptic claims that (P1) is based on our ordinary ideas of what it is to dream and what it is to be awake, which is why he thinks we have to accept (P1). How should this relation between (P1) and our ordinary

beliefs more precisely be understood? Consider the following two descriptions of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream:

Being Awake. To be awake is to be in a state in which our senses normally represent the world as the world is, and in which most of our conceptual representations of the world, at least many of our common sense beliefs, are true. When we are awake our beliefs and desires normally cause us to behave in ways that correspond to how we think we behave.

Dreaming. To dream is to be in a state during sleep (typically involving a person lying down with eyes closed, breathing normally and so on) in which our senses often do not represent the world as it is, and in which many of the mental representations of the world that we form are false. When we are dreaming, the representations that we form do not normally cause us to behave in ways that correspond to how we think we behave in the dream.

Exactly how these ideas of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream should be characterized is not of vital importance here. The important point is that, as the above descriptions clearly suggest, ordinary thinkers tend to share beliefs about the nature of the two states. The Dream argument appeals to these beliefs and claims that upon reflection we are forced to accept that the states are identical from the inside in the sense that they are subjectively indistinguishable. I will from now on assume that the above descriptions capture the ordinary beliefs that the skeptic bases his argument on in a reasonable way. It will be easy to understand how the objection I will present is independent of the exact content of these beliefs.

It is one thing to claim that (P1) appeals to our ordinary beliefs, another to show that the plausibility of (P1) depends on these beliefs in some determinate way. I will argue that insofar as there are reasons for accepting (P1), then these reasons must be provided by our ordinary beliefs. This means, I will argue, that the first step of the Dream argument violates the internalist condition on justification that the second step presupposes.

Establishing that there exists a justificatory relation between our ordinary beliefs and (P1) is of course different from establishing that there exists a conceptual relation. It is a reasonable claim that if we do not understand (P1) on the basis of our common sense beliefs about what it is to dream and what it is to be awake, then the words 'awake' and 'dreaming' in (P1) have a meaning that is different from the meaning we normally associate with them. Furthermore, with a different meaning (P1) could be understood as a claim that does not have even an immediate appeal. But the fact that there exists a relation of this kind does not imply that (P1) must be justified by our ordinary beliefs in order to be plausible.

That there is such a relation of justification does not seem to be obvious, for why not accept that (P1) is self-evident? It cannot be argued that (P1) is not self-evident since (P1) would be implausible if we did not have our ordinary beliefs about what it is to dream and what it is to be awake. The problem with this argument is that the idea of a self-evident sentence should focus on the content of a sentence. A sentence can only be self-evident in virtue of having a certain meaning, and as already noted, it is reasonable to suppose that the meaning of (P1) would be different if we did not understand it in the light of our ordinary beliefs.

However, the fact that a sentence can only be self-evident in virtue of being understood in a certain way suggests a more promising argument for showing that (P1) needs to be justified by our ordinary beliefs. Note that even if the status of (P1) depends on the meaning of the terms it involves, it can still be the case that someone who thinks that (P1) is true does so in virtue of having a theory of what it is to dream and to be awake. This option, in fact, is not only possible, but also the option that is recommended by a long tradition in philosophy of mind and language that rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction, the idea that there is a distinction to be drawn between sentences that are true 'purely in virtue of meaning' and sentences that are not. According to philosophers who have rejected this distinction, if one thinks that a sentence seems to state an 'analytical' truth, this is not because one has grasped some special meaning that essentially belongs to the sentence, but because one has a certain theory of the world that the sentence is about.

Harman has formulated the key idea in the argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction in an illuminating way:

When Quine, Putnam, Winograd, and a host of others raised objections to the analytic-synthetic distinction, they did not mention controversial philosophical analyses. When problems were raised about particular conceptual claims, they were problems about the examples that had been offered as seemingly clear cases of a priori truth — the principles of Euclidean geometry, the law of excluded middle, 'Cats are animals,' 'Unmarried adult male humans are bachelors,' 'Women are female'.... We can imagine discovering that cats are not animals but are radio-controlled robots from Mars. Speakers do not consider the Pope a bachelor. People will not apply the term 'bachelor' to a man who lives with the same woman over a long enough period of time even if they are not married. Society pages in newspapers will identify as eligible 'bachelors' men who are in the process of being divorced but are still married. The Olympic Committee may have rejected certain women as insufficiently female on the basis of their chromosomes. (Harman 1999, 140)

The problem for the proponent of the analytic-synthetic distinction is not that it is possible to think that a sentence like 'Bachelors are unmarried men' is false. It is uncontroversial that this is possible, since one can always imagine a case in which someone associates the sentence with a

non-standard meaning. The fundamental problem, philosophers have often held, is that two persons who associate the same proposition that bachelors are unmarried with 'Bachelors are unmarried' can conceive of the truth of this proposition in different ways because they have different theories of what a bachelor and an unmarried man are. According to this way of understanding the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, philosophers who accept the distinction are wrong when they assume that 'certain propositions can be true simply in virtue of what is meant by the words that are used to express them' (Harman 1999, 140).⁷

This interpretation of the argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction is often associated with Hilary Putnam's theory of 'division of linguistic labour' and his corresponding idea that there are 'producers' and 'consumers' of concepts (Putnam 1975). In recent years, Putnam's idea that different persons can associate the same concept with an expression even though they do not understand the concepts in the same way, has perhaps received most attention in connection with Tyler Burge's arguments for mental content externalism.⁸ Burge has argued that a layperson who does not have expert knowledge of the extension of a natural kind term will possess the same concept as an expert, as long as he is in a community in which the expert's understanding represents the normative meaning (Burge 1982; 1990). According to Burge, a person with the same understanding who lives in a community in which the standard meaning of the concept is different will not possess the same natural kind concept.

For the purpose of my arguments here it is not necessary to accept all the argumentative steps for mental content externalism or any special development of the idea that one and the same concept can be understood in different ways. It is sufficient that the idea of diversity of understanding is conceived of as plausible, that two persons can have beliefs involving the same concepts even though they understand the

7 Some theories of concept possession invoke a person's justification for accepting a proposition as part of the condition for possessing a concept that the proposition involves (Peacocke 1992, 1998). The distinction in the text is consistent with this view. The reason is that the view also accepts that we can make a conceptual distinction between conditions of concept possession and justificatory relations: the latter idea is used to explain what it is to possess a concept.

8 Putnam's original distinction between consumers and producers of concepts did not focus explicitly on concept possession, but Putnam has more recently made it clear that he accepts Burge's interpretation of the differences that can be found between mental contents in the externalistic 'Twin Earth' thought experiments (Putnam 1996).

concepts in different ways.⁹ For Burge and others who have accepted this idea, it is precisely connected to the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction (Burge 1979; 1990, Travis 1995). Speaking about the distinction Burge says: 'With Quine, I find such talk of purity and mixture devoid of illumination or explanatory power' (Burge 1979, 88). As Harman observed in the above quote, the problem is that even the most obvious candidates for analytical truths seem open to counterexamples. Burge's own famous example involves a person who has a partial misunderstanding of the word 'arthritis.' Even though 'Inflammation of the joints' might seem like an analytical truth it is nevertheless, according to Burge, possible for a person to genuinely believe that arthritis does not have to occur in joints, and thereby be agnostic about the truth of the sentence 'Arthritis is inflammation of the joints.'¹⁰

The same idea applies to (P1) of the Dream argument. Like the sentence 'Arthritis is inflammation of the joints,' (P1) might strike most of us as self-evident. But to understand (P1) — to associate this premise with the belief that conscious mental states I am in when I am awake

9 For a comprehensive selection of discussions of the idea, see Pessin and Goldberg (1996). In addition to philosophers who explicitly have focused on the arguments presented by Burge and Putnam, many philosophers who are opposed to versions of meaning holism will accept that different persons can understand one and the same concept in different ways. The general line of argument will be that we never understand a concept in exactly the same way, and that one therefore has to accept some version of the Putnam/Burge view in order to avoid the implication that we never have (and communicate) beliefs with the same content (Fodor and Lepore 1992).

10 At this stage some might object that it is implausible to talk about beliefs as involving concepts, since this is to accept a Fregean view of concepts as platonic eternal ideas that is inconsistent with the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. But this objection is misplaced. As many philosophers have observed in recent years, it is possible to adopt a more minimalistic conception of what concept possession involves. The fundamental idea in this conception is that a person possesses a concept *c* if an ascription of the form 'S believes that *_c_*' is true of him. As Burge notes, this does not imply that the expression in the that-clause of the belief report actually refers to the concept *c*: 'I remain neutral here about what, ontologically speaking contents are' (Burge 1982, 118). What Burge relies on is the weaker idea that obliquely occurring expressions in belief reports characterise ways of thinking of objects or properties, that 'oblique occurrences in mentalistic discourse have something to do with characterizing a person's epistemic perspective' (Burge 1979, 78). For example, if an ascriber of a belief understands 'water' as occurring obliquely in the belief he ascribes, then he means that the person that has been ascribed the belief thinks of water as *water* and not as *H2O*. Even philosophers like Quine and Davidson, who both accept the idea about oblique occurrences, should be able to accept this minimal idea of concept possession (Quine 1953, Davidson 1968).

are subjectively indistinguishable from conscious mental states I can be in while dreaming — does not in itself mean that one has to think that the premise is true. Even sentences that might seem much more analytical than (P1) are, in reality, open to doubt. The point is that it is not, in general, possible to understand that a sentence expresses a true belief simply in virtue of possessing the concepts that the belief involves. The reasons a person has for holding that a sentence expresses a true belief always have another source; they are always grounded in a theory the person has. Consequently, if we think that (P1) is plausible, then that is because we have a theory of what it is to dream and be awake that someone who does not think that the premise is plausible does not have. It is this theory, not the fact that we are able to understand the sentence, that provides the reasons we have for thinking that the premise is plausible. (P1) is therefore not self-evident in the sense that anyone who understands (P1) must realize that it is true.

As emphasized above, it is widely held that a satisfactory objection to the Dream argument should acknowledge that the premises have an immediate appeal and contain an explanation of why this is so. One important aspect of the above argument for the conclusion that (P1) is not self-evident is that it offers a straightforward explanation: the reason most of us think that (P1) has a certain appeal is that it is based on our ordinary ideas of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream. By accepting this alternative analysis one does not have to accept that the immediate appeal of (P1) constitutes a convincing argument for self-evidence.

VII The incoherence objection

The objection to the Dream argument can now be stated as follows: (P2) was plausible only if my justification for my belief that I am awake needs to be provided by conscious states with qualitative properties that dream states cannot have. This idea of transparency of justification seemed to presuppose a more general version that included (P1) among the beliefs that have to be justified transparently: first of all, if the skeptic had claimed that (P1) expresses an empirical belief, then (P1) could not be justified unless we know that we are awake. For in that case (P1) would have to be justified on the basis of empirical investigations of the external world, but if we are able to make such investigations then we have cognitive access to the external world and we know, presumably, that we are awake.

The other option for someone who wants to defend the idea that internalism does not generalize to (P1) is to claim that (P1) is self-evident, that the plausibility of the belief expressed by (P1) does not depend on

anything else. Relying on a version of the argument against the analytic-synthetic distinction I have argued that this suggestion is false: it is possible to understand the proposition expressed by (P1) without thinking that it is true; just as it is possible to understand but be agnostic about propositions expressed by sentences that have traditionally been thought of as analytical. If we think that (P1) is plausible, it is because we have a common sense theory of what it is to be awake and to dream that provides the reasons we think we have for accepting (P1).

Since both (P1) and the belief that I am awake represent beliefs about introspective properties of conscious mental states, since none of them are empirical, and since none of them are self-evident, it is reasonable to suppose that they must be justified in the same way. It is difficult to see what the relevant difference could be, how it can be legitimate to claim that while one of the beliefs must be justified transparently, the other must not. If the plausibility of the Dream argument turns on an alleged difference between the beliefs, the skeptic owes us a further explanation of what the relevant difference is, and we have managed to place the burden of proof with him; he needs to explain why the premises are plausible.

I have argued that we have managed to achieve this aim. (P2) requires transparent justification in the sense I have focused on. But if (P1) requires transparent justification, then our ordinary ideas of what it is to be awake and what it is to dream cannot constitute reasons for accepting this premise. The reason is not merely that it is natural to assume that it is possible to form these ideas in a dream. The reason is that the skeptic is forced to accept that we can form them in a dream. Remember that the skeptic thinks that I have direct cognitive access to my conscious states: I know, right now, that I am thinking that I sometimes dream while I sleep. If the skeptic holds that it is impossible to form this idea in a dream, then I can reason like this: I am thinking that I sometimes dream while asleep. I cannot, while I am dreaming, think that I sometimes dream while asleep. Therefore it is impossible that I am dreaming.

The problem can also be stated the other way around. (P1) must be based on our ordinary beliefs. These beliefs, the skeptic must accept, are beliefs it is possible to have in a dream. But in order for (P2) to be plausible, beliefs and other conscious states one can be in during a dream cannot provide justification for a proposition like (P1): such states are not transparent to us in the sense that they have to be. The Dream argument is therefore incoherent: both (P1) and (P2) cannot be plausible, since this requires that an internalist conception of justification is both accepted and rejected.

VIII The wider significance of the objection

In this final section I reject a response to the objection I have presented. The response focuses on my formulation of the first premise of the argument and claims that there is a way of formulating the initial step of the skeptic's reasoning that is invulnerable to the objection I have raised.

I have conceived of the first premise (P1) of the Dream argument as the claim that the state of being awake and possible dream states are subjectively indistinguishable. But what if one instead formulated the first premise as a claim that appeals to underdetermination and not subjectively indistinguishability, in the following way?

(P1*) The hypothesis that I am dreaming is just as good an explanation of my experience as the hypothesis that I am awake.

(P2*) If (P1*), then I do not know that I am not dreaming.

(P3*) If I do not know that I am not dreaming, then I do not have external world knowledge.

(C*) I do not have external world knowledge.

If the objection to the Dream argument I have developed does not apply to this alternative version, the skeptic could simply retreat to this formulation and continue to claim that we have to accept that we do not have external world knowledge. In order to be philosophically significant, it is therefore important that the incoherence objection I have developed generalizes to the alternative formulation.¹¹

The problem with the alternative version, I suggest, is that in order to have even an immediate appeal, (P1*) needs to be connected to the idea that states of being awake and possible dream states are indistinguishable. Why should we accept (P1*)? Why is the hypothesis that I dreaming just as good an explanation of my experience as the hypothesis that I am awake? The reason must be that it is possible that I am dreaming. But as emphasized above, this idea has to be understood in an epistemological way. I cannot both be dreaming and be awake. The idea of the possibility of dreaming is meant to capture the idea that I cannot tell whether I am dreaming or not.

11 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for this journal for pointing out that it is important that I confront this alternative formulation of the skeptic's reasoning.

I do not mean to argue that there is a strong conceptual dependence between (P1) and (P1*), that (P1*), in order to be plausible, must mean the same as (P1). What I am relying on is that (P1*), in order to be plausible, must be intimately connected to (P1) and understood in something like this way: The hypothesis that I am dreaming is just as good an explanation of my experience as the hypothesis that I am awake, in the sense that conscious mental states I am in when awake are subjectively indistinguishable from conscious mental states I can be in while dreaming. Here it is the last phrase that provides the informative content of the expression ‘just as good explanation.’ The phrase explains the sense in which the skeptic thinks that the dream hypothesis represents an equally good explanation.

But now (P2*) becomes correspondingly complex and involves in the antecedent the idea that the two types of states are subjectively indistinguishable. The premise must therefore presuppose the version of internalism I have focused on: It is the original (P1) that carries the argumentative weight — the reason that I do not know that I am not dreaming is fundamentally conceived to be (P1).

It is important to emphasize that even if someone is not fully persuaded by this argument, then he should at least accept that it constitutes a challenge for the skeptic. The skeptic needs to explain why (P1*), in order to be a plausible claim, does not depend on (P1) in such a way that (P1) carries the argumentative weight in the second premise of the argument. It is not easy to understand how there can be a convincing explanation of this kind, how there can be an alternative basis for claiming that the dream hypothesis constitutes an equally good explanation.

The more general lesson to be learned from this is that no matter how the Dream argument is formulated, it has to be connected to the idea that a subject is not able to tell whether he is dreaming or not. It is Descartes’ (1955, 146) above quoted claim that ‘there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep’ that drives the skeptic’s reasoning. As long as it is this idea that is fundamentally meant to establish that I do not know that I am awake, then the objection I have developed applies. The skeptic needs to presuppose a version of epistemic internalism in the step where he connects Descartes’ claim to the idea that I do not know that I am awake, but Descartes’ claim needs to be grounded in our ordinary beliefs in a way that is inconsistent with this version of internalism.

Just as the objection I have developed in this way is neutral with respect to how the Dream argument should be formulated, it is also neutral with respect to the choice between epistemic internalism and externalism. It would require a further discussion to determine whether or not one should accept the version of epistemic internalism that the second step of the skeptic’s reasoning presupposes. If it turns out

that this version of internalism should be accepted, then the first step is implausible. If it turns out that it should be rejected, then the second step is implausible. The choice between internalism and externalism remains controversial, but without presupposing that any version of internalism or externalism is correct it is possible to use the internalist assumptions that the skeptic makes to show that the skeptic's argument is unconvincing.¹²

Received: May 2004

Revised: February 2006

References

- Boghossian, P. 1994. 'The Transparency of Mental Content.' *Philosophical Perspectives* 8: 33-50.
- Bonjour, L. 1980. 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5: 53-74.
- _____. 1992. 'Externalism and Internalism.' In *A Companion to Epistemology*, E. Sosa and J. Dancy, eds. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bueckner, A. 1994. 'Skepticism and the Causal Theory of Reference.' *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44: 213-22.
- Burge, T. 1979. 'Individualism and the Mental.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4: 73-121.
- _____. 1982. 'Other Bodies.' In *Thought and Object*, A. Woodfield, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____. 1990. 'Frege on Sense and Linguistic Meaning.' In *The Analytical Tradition: Meaning, Thought and Knowledge*, D. Bell and N. Cooper, eds. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Chisholm, R. 1977. *Theory of Knowledge*. London: Prentice-Hall International.
- Dancy, J. 1986. *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1968. 'On Saying That.' *Synthese* 19: 130-46.
- Descartes, R. 1955. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Edited and translated by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross. New York: Dover.
- DeRose, K. 1995. 'Solving the Sceptical Problem.' *The Philosophical Review* 104: 1-52.
- _____. 1999. 'Introduction.' In *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. K. DeRose & T Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12 I would like to thank Carsten Hansen, Olav Gjelsvik, Simon Clarke, Paul Snowdon and two anonymous referees for this journal for very helpful discussions and comments on earlier versions of this paper.

- Dretske, F. 1981. 'The Pragmatic Dimension of Knowledge.' *Philosophical Studies* 40: 363-78.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fodor, J. and Lepore, E. 1992. *Holism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gibbons, J. 1996. 'Externalism and Knowledge of Content.' *The Philosophical Review* 105: 278-310.
- Hill, C. 1996. 'Process Reliabilism and Cartesian Skepticism.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56: 567-81.
- Kripke, S. 1997. 'A Puzzle about Belief.' In *Meaning and Use*, A. Margalit, ed. Dordrecht: D.Reidel.
- _____. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lewis, D. 1979. 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game.' *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339-59.
- _____. 1996. 'Elusive Knowledge.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 239-49.
- Peacocke, C. 1992. *A Study of Concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- _____. 1998. *Being Known*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pessin, H. and Goldberg, S. (eds) 1996. *The Twin Earth Chronicles*. London & New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Putnam, H. 1981. *Reason, Truth and History*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1975. 'The Meaning of Meaning.' *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7: 131-93.
- _____. 1996. 'Introduction.' In *The Twin Earth Chronicles*, A. Pessin and S. Goldberg, eds. London & New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Quine, W. V. 1953. 'Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes.' *The Journal of Philosophy* 53: 177-187.
- Schiffer, S. 1996. 'Contextualist Solutions to Skepticism.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96: 317-33.
- Sosa, E. 1994. 'Philosophical Skepticism and Epistemic Circularity.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 24: 263-290.
- Stroud, B. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____. 1989. 'Understanding Human Knowledge in General.' In *Knowledge and Skepticism*, M. Clay and K. Lehrer, eds. Boulder, CO & London: Westview Press.
- _____. 1994. 'Skepticism, 'Externalism,' and the Goal of Epistemology.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 24: 291-307.
- Williams, M. 1988. 'Skepticism without Theory.' *Review of Metaphysics* 41: 547-88.
- Wright, C. 1991. 'Skepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon.' *Mind* 100: 87-115.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- _____. 1969. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.