

DID I DREAM THAT OR DID IT REALLY HAPPEN?
**A phenomenological criterion for distinguishing remembered
dream experiences from remembered waking experiences**

DAVID E. WARD

Philosophy Department
University of Otago
PO Box 56
DUNEDIN
NEW ZEALAND

david.ward@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

Abstract: *Is there a way to tell whether what you remember was something you dreamt or something that really happened without making reference to coherence criteria? I suggest contra Descartes that there is a certain sign 'by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep'. This certain sign is the intensive magnitude (Kant's term) associated with every sensation.*

Key-words: *dreams; scepticism; Descartes; Kant; Malcolm; intensive magnitudes.*

Since Descartes, one of the most persistent epistemological conundrums is the problem posed by dreams. Descartes argues (on the basis of the fact that he has had dreams in which ordinary waking experiences have been duplicated) “there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished clearly from being asleep” (Descartes (1984), p.13). It is assumed that dream experiences are not related to external reality, and it therefore follows that waking experiences which are phenomenologically identical to dream experiences have no *prima facie* right to be regarded as related to any external reality – and that is a problem. However it is not felt as a

pressing problem simply because dream experiences are, by and large, pretty odd: strange things happen and sequences of events that make up dreams often make little sense when we recount them. In fact, for most of us, there are very few dreams which ever reproduce the ordinary but richly detailed sequences of events that characterize daily life. So Descartes really begs the question openly when he insists that his dreams are often reproductions of daily life. “How often, asleep at night, am I convinced... that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!” (Descartes (1984), p.13).

However Descartes’ point is not that such ‘ordinary life’ dreams are commonplace but that they are possible, and that because they do actually happen from time to time we have ‘no sure signs by means of which being aware can be distinguished clearly from being asleep’.

Since Descartes’ time, his characterization of this epistemological puzzle – roughly that we are seldom deceived by our dreams but that we could be, if only for a short period – has been accepted and (following Descartes) the solution to the problem has been to deny that dreams constitute a real problem for epistemology on the basis of the fact that their incoherent scenarios typically give them away. When we are awake, for example, people do not (as Descartes says) “suddenly appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep” (Descartes (1984), p.62). However, such judgments (*viz.*, that the dream scenario is odd/incoherent) can only be made *retrospectively*, not at the dream-moment since, at that moment, by assumption, the phenomenology of the dream can give us no occasion to doubt its veracity. The experience at the moment of what is happening (the sequence of events and the way they interconnect or fail to) does not seem incoherent to us while we are dreaming, since, if it did, we would no longer be dreaming in the usual sense of the word. This feeling we have that a dream is only a dream if you, so to speak, are caught up in it and accept the odd sequences quite uncritically, reflects the fact that we only make critical

judgments (concerning the incoherence of dreams) retrospectively. Thus if, while dreaming, we said to ourselves “this is odd” we would *ipso facto* be in a waking state since, to be able to make the remark ‘this is odd’, we would have to be comparing the non-standard sequence of events happening in the dream with some standard sequence of events and such a cognitive operation is – as Descartes points out – characteristic of waking states.

On the basis of similar observations Norman Malcolm has argued that we do not perform any cognitive operations while we are dreaming. Thus since we do not make judgments, we do not know or believe or doubt or wonder anything in a dream and therefore we could not, *a fortiori*, be *deceived* while dreaming. On the basis of these considerations Malcolm asserts that dreams are not experiences in the ordinary sense and therefore not experiences at all.¹

An argument for this claim that we do remember dreams and report these experiences accurately in a perfectly ordinary sense is that we can judge (as we recount them) whether we are (in our description) embroidering our memory of the dream. (we can tell, in other words, whether we are being, as Malcolm puts it, ‘truthful’ (Malcolm (1967), p.95)). From the fact that we can make this distinction it follows that the dreams we recall are experiences in a very ordinary sense since I have the same sense of embroidering (or not²) when I recount a waking experience which only I, as a matter of fact, witnessed. (The feeling that dream experiences and waking experiences both actually happen to us and are capable of being *recalled* in the same sense of that

¹ “The experience of thinking your bed is on fire and (if you are sound asleep) thinking in your dream that your bed is on fire are ‘experiences’ in different senses of the word”, (Malcolm (1967), p. 67).

² Brian Smith remarks, “Why jib at accepting other people’s amendments of their own memory reports of dreams when we cheerfully accept similar amendments in memory reports of waking experiences,” (1965), p.48.

word is why I can and often do say in the midst of some recitation of a memory: ‘Did I dream that or did it really happen?’³)

Now, to repeat, though we can certainly grant Malcolm his point – that while I am actually dreaming I cannot carry out the sorts of procedure that I would carryout in waking life in order to investigate whether or not I am awake (e.g., judging the coherence of the current experience with the rest of my life) – despite this difference, we still have a strong sense of *remembering* – in a perfectly ordinary way – the images of our dreams. The content of our dreams is not something we feel we are making up as we recount them in the morning (to a fascinated audience). And since, when I remember doing *x*, I can wonder if I really did that or whether I just dreamt that I did, we are presented with the possibility of just the sort of confusion that Descartes envisaged in his famous argument, only we are presented with it retrospectively, i.e., I know I am awake now, but are certain remembered sequences of events in my past life actually based on experiences I had when I was dreaming?

So to sum up: distinguishing waking from dreaming experiences on the basis of their coherence (or lack of it) may not be sufficient to allow us to distinguish remembered dream experiences from remembered waking experiences. In some cases we may honestly declare that we do not know and cannot tell via the application of coherence

³ Brian Smith again: “And I can point out that very many people seem to see nothing strange in the suggestion that sometimes we may not be quite sure whether something we seem to remember really happened or we just dreamt it which suggests pretty strongly that what generally makes the difference clear to us is the content of the memory, not the mode of remembering.” (Smith (1965), p.50.) Also Robert Hanna: “Although it is not often noticed, there can be actual waking experiences, presenting themselves as coherent, which nevertheless reveal themselves upon a little reflection to be structurally incoherent and hence as possibly dreamt. So actual waking experience together with apparent coherence, although they are jointly necessary for the certain recognition of waking experience are not sufficient.” (1992), pp.394-95.

criteria available to us, whether what we remember was something we dreamt or something that we experienced while we were awake. Thus – when coherence fails – what we require to refute Descartes’s indistinguishability claim is a way to distinguish the phenomenology of dreams – as remembered – from the phenomenology of waking experiences (whether remembered or present).

I shall argue that Kant supplies the means to set forth a convincing argument against the view that there are no certain marks to distinguish waking memories of waking experiences from waking memories of dreaming experiences. (I pose the problem this way to avoid Malcolm’s objection against trying to do things like ‘distinguishing’ while asleep and dreaming).

KANT’S DISTINCTION

Kant says that every qualitative experience has an intensive magnitude:

In all appearances, the real that is an object of sensation has intensive magnitude, that is, degree.⁴

The *degree* of reality that a sensation has (e.g., how loud a sound is) can be apprehended in an instant, and interestingly enough, if it has any degree of intensive magnitude at all, it could have a smaller (or larger) one. This tallies with our common sense understanding of the situation

⁴ “[To say that a given sensation has an intensive magnitude is to say that it has a certain intensity, which can vary] in a certain time ... from nothing = 0 to the given measure. Corresponding to this intensity of sensation, an *intensive magnitude*, that is, a degree of influence on the sense [*i.e.*, on the special sense involved], must be ascribed to all objects of perception, in so far as the perception contains sensation.” (Kant (1933), p. 202 (A166)). Kant’s observations accords with the scientific view that when we experience a sensation a certain level of energy impinges upon the sense organ concerned.

viz; that whatever the causes of our sensations may be, the sensations impinge upon us *at some particular energy level* and that this is reflected in our experience of them. Thus the amplitude of the particular frequency of a light source determines the particular brightness of the colour. Kant is simply pointing out that if the experience I have is to be a *real* experience of, e.g., yellow light, the yellow expanse I experience will present itself as having some particular degree of brightness which varies directly with the amount of energy impinging on our sense organ. This observation of Kant's is easily verified by simply *imagining* the sun. What we immediately notice – once it is called to our attention – is that the imagined sun has no particular intensive magnitude. Instead, my image of the sun in my imagination is not something whose relative brightness I can increase or decrease at will. And this is because I cannot increase or decrease the amount of energy that it is giving off. I cannot – so to speak – crank up its imaginative brightness to the point at which it dazzles my inner eye. Nor can I crank up the volume of the imagined opening four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to the point where the volume produced hurts my mind's ear. It is this lack of an intensive magnitude that signals to me that such imagined sensations are not real and I suggest that by using this feature I can distinguish whether what I remember now was something I dreamt or something that really happened. Thus I can remember looking up and being dazzled by the sun and thus conclude it was part of a waking experience not something that I just dreamt. By the same token I can remember being in a room where there was a wind blowing everything about and remember that I myself did not feel the wind (I was experiencing the wind without experiencing it as having any intensive magnitude i.e., I did not feel it as weak or strong) and so conclude that the experience I remember (involving the wind) was a dream.

This distinction allows us to explain a number of puzzling features of dream experiences. Because dream experiences have no intensive magnitude (no energy impinges upon the mind's eye or ear

when we dream) we have no experience of the qualitative representation of energy levels (namely, brightness, loudness, etc.). Furthermore, we never suffer pain in dreams. Pain is associated with sensations which have high intensive magnitudes. When is the last time you had an unpleasantly noisy dream or had to shade your eyes against the glare of the dream sun, or recoiled from the unpleasant smell of rotting dream cabbage or tasted a dream salsa that was too spicy, or painfully scraped your dream hand on a dream boulder?

Think of the fact that we can even ask the question of whether people dream in colour or in black and white. This fits in nicely with the idea that a colour with no intensive magnitude would be a rather washed-out, neutral, could-be-any-colour-at-all sort of colour. (A notion reminiscent of Hume's characterization of ideas as 'pale copies' of impressions.) Think of the fine detail which is available in waking experience. Our experience of this detail is a function of the discriminations we can make due to the variations of the energy input from various parts of, e.g., the warp and woof of a piece of cloth. These variations in the intensive magnitude of sensations are a feature of experience that is simply unavailable in dreams.⁵ (Last night I had a

⁵ One of the most common objections to any solution of the sort I have given is to suggest that we *could* imagine a dream which had these features (e.g., intensive magnitudes). However, when we make this move we "systematically rule out as irrelevant all the most obvious respects in which they [dreaming and waking experiences] might be found to differ, to the point where we are quite unable to suggest what kinds of differences might satisfy us. It will of course be a difference such as would show that waking experiences are not 'all in the mind', but we have not thought out what would be an example of such a difference." (Hunter (1983), p.88.) I believe the varying energy input that is reflected in intensive magnitudes is just such a difference since our sense of these differences being 'given' is overwhelming: we simply cannot manufacture sensations with intensive magnitudes ourselves as is evident from our experience of imagining. This activity would be much more popular if we could.

dream about a dog and retrospectively I can remember that I saw none of the detail of its hair.)

Think of voices and conversations and of the quality of the voices in dreams: they hardly register as sensations at all, not loud or soft, just intelligible, just thoughts registered in our own ‘reading’ inner voice – with no more intensive magnitude than that inner voice has.

Think of those falling down-the-stairs dreams. When they first occur you wake up when you hit the bottom but after a while you somehow learn that landing in dreams doesn’t hurt. In fact, we are never afraid of experiencing painful sensations when we go to sleep: “those dreams which shake us nightly” that Lady Macbeth and her husband dreaded were terrifying not painful.

I suggest then that dreaming, from a phenomenological point of view, is the same as imagining. You would never confuse imagining with sensing (the process that supplies the content of waking experience) simply because you cannot supply an intensive magnitude to an imagined sensation. If we accept this we can conclude that there *are* certain signs whereby dream experiences – when we call them – can be certainly distinguished from waking experiences – when we recall them. The latter can be recalled as being painful (unpleasantly loud, too bright, etc.) but never the former.⁶

⁶ An anonymous referee raised the question of dreams in which we incorporate outside stimuli into the dream, such as an alarm clock or the sensation of a full bladder. Since these sensations do have intensive magnitudes they will cause discomfort and this real discomfort will eventually cause us to wake. However, there might well be an in-between stage at which the intensive magnitude of the sensation will somehow be suppressed so that the sound of the alarm incorporated as, say, a fire alarm, will not seem loud to us. However, if it persists, its loudness will become apparent and we will wake. It seems that we can fool ourselves in dreams for a while – but only for a while – when it comes to incorporating external stimuli into our dreams: intensive magnitudes are the mark of real sensations and we always awake in order to cope with them appropriately.

Dreams can certainly be enjoyable but not in the way that sensations can be enjoyed. Thus while dreams can be emotionally satisfying (or upsetting) they cannot yield the gratification/discomfort related to various levels of the intensive magnitudes which sensations provide.

This raises an interesting point: if the experiences which I present to myself by exercising my imagination (or the experiences which 'happen to me' while dreaming) have no intensive magnitude, it follows that the experiences themselves are not composed of sensations since sensation must have some degree of intensive magnitude. What then is the 'material' in which these imagined or dreamt experiences are realized? When you introspect on some familiar product of the imagination such as your silent reading voice, you realize that it is not something that you hear: you know this because it is not loud or soft, but what then is it? What phenomenological quality does it have? Clearly it is not that of a 'pale' sensation – one with a low intensive magnitude. It instead exhibits a *sui generis* quality for which we have no name other than to describe it in terms of the faculty that produces it, e.g., 'imaginary', and we can contrast 'imaginary' experiences with real ones on the basis of the fact that imaginary ones lack intensive magnitudes. But what do they have instead? In what material do they make themselves manifest to us? Their *sui generis* quality is apparent when I 'explain' that I hear them with my mind's ear or see them with my mind's eye, organs which are themselves imaginary. We have no doubt whatsoever that we are aware of these 'mental' images and sounds. But we can get no further in characterizing their peculiar mode of being as they appear before the mind's eye, ear, etc.

Whatever they may be, what I want to emphasize is that what they *lack* is an intensive magnitude. This contention is obvious once it is pointed out. As a consequence, when a person is awake and this feature of their experience is brought to their attention, they cannot be

in doubt about its presence in every modality of sensation they are experiencing. When they are asked to remember if this same quality is present in their dreams they will recognize that it is not: their dream reports reflect this in the simple fact that no one has ever complained about how painful, (noisy etc.) their dreams were. (A knock-down argument!) If you still think you might be asleep and dreaming give yourself a good pinch – if you are asleep and dreaming it won't hurt. I might of course dream that it hurts but the dream hurt won't *hurt*. No experience can hurt that lacks an intensive magnitude. And *this* is the 'certain sign' that can be recognized retrospectively. This is how the crushing objection posed by many but nicely epitomized by Leslie Stevenson can be dealt with:

We can dream that we are *doing* things, including exploring, perceiving and interacting with things and people, just as much as passively under-going experiences. To the old saw that one can deliberately and actively *pinch* oneself to make sure that one is not dreaming, there is the equally old reply that one might only be dreaming that one is pinching oneself (and feeling the pinch) (Stevenson (1995), pp.188-9).

If we had memories of painful dreams this argument would be sound, but we just don't *feel* the dream pinch.⁷

This suggested criterion for distinguishing dreams from waking experiences raises a further interesting point: do other mental experiences, e.g., hallucinations, the voices heard by schizophrenics, the visions of the opium eater, involve intensive magnitudes? Thus the voices heard by schizophrenics are often described as compelling and insistent but are they also sometimes *loud*?⁸

⁷ Now if someone contends that in fact her dreams are characterized by intensive magnitudes then I simply admit that my theory is wrong. I could only suggest by way of mitigation that she may be unique in that what people generally say about their dreams does not reflect her experience.

⁸ In conversation Alan Musgrave suggested that this criterion could perhaps be used to help someone suffering from false memory syndrome to

CONCLUSION

One might wonder why such an obvious argument has escaped notice up to this point. Hume's distinction (between pale and languid ideas versus vivid impressions) might seem like a promising way to distinguish imaginings (including dreams) from waking experiences until we recognize that, for Hume, this distinction is one of degree not of kind: "On the other hand we find, that any impressions either of the mind or body is constantly followed by an idea which resembles it, and is only different in the degrees of force and liveliness." (Hume (1978), p.5). Thus the pale/vivid distinction being one of degree cannot serve as a means of distinguishing dream experiences from waking experiences which contain sensations. This is apparent in the following passage where he confuses the two: "The common degrees of these [feeling and thinking (impressions and ideas)] are easily distinguished; 'tho it is not impossible but in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other. Thus in sleep [presumably 'when dreaming'], in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions; as on the other hand, it sometimes happens that our impressions are so faint and low that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas." (Hume (1978), p.2). Given the nature of this distinction – the fact that for Hume the difference between our experiences when imagining and sensing is one of degree (and not one of kind as I am suggesting⁹) – some dreams could provide us with impressions and that would preclude our using the 'vivid' status of impressions as a certain sign to distinguish waking from dreaming experiences. Thus Hume was never in a position to solve Descartes' epistemological puzzle.

determine whether their memory was of a real event.

⁹ I thank an anonymous referee for clarifying this point for me: Hume was never in a position to classify objects of the imagination or dream objects as being wholly lacking in intensive magnitudes i.e., 'vividness'.

Kant could have solved this puzzle – in the sense that he had the appropriate distinction in hand – but when he distinguishes dreaming from waking life he does so on the coherence principle:

If then my perception is to contain knowledge of an event, of something as actually happening, it must be an empirical judgment in which we think the sequence as determined; that is, it presupposes another appearance in time, upon which it follows necessarily, according to a rule. Were it not so, were I to posit the antecedent and the event were not to follow necessarily thereupon, I should have to regard the succession as a merely subjective play of my fancy, and if I still represented it to myself as something objective, I should have to call it a mere dream. (Kant (1933), p.227, (B 246-7)).

In short: “whether this or that supposed experience be not purely imaginary must be ascertained from its special determinations, and through its congruence with the criteria of all real experience” (*Ibid.*). For whatever reason, it simply did not occur to Kant to explicitly use the intensive magnitude criterion to distinguish dreams from waking experiences but the potential was there. This may reflect an early prejudice in favour of the orthodox Cartesian view which is evident in this quotation from the *Prolegomena*. “The difference between truth and dreams... is not decided through the quality of the representations that are referred to objects, for they are the same in both” (Kant (1997), p.42). In the *Anthropology* Kant speculates that, “if our dream the following night began where it left off the night before, would we not believe that we lived in two different worlds?” The implication (once again) being that one could not tell *from the character of the representation* which was the dream world (Kant (1968), p.175).

My survey of the current literature on this question revealed one or two suggestions which were tantalizingly close in spirit to the suggestion I have put forward. J.F.M Hunter, for instance, suggests that though we can describe dream experiences in such a way that “Any feature that would make it true to life [can be] written in” to the

description “and the whole sequence designated as a dream”. (Hunter (1983), p. 92). He remarks that, “This proves nothing so much as that human beings can describe handshakes and call them dream events. It would show what it was intended to show only if it were known that human beings were designed in such a way that no falsehood could cross our lips” (*Ibid.*, p. 92). He concludes that though he does not take himself “to have provided an answer to the question of whether or in what ways [dreams and waking experiences] differ, [he does take himself] to have shown that it cannot confidently be contended that they are indistinguishable at least when the dream events are of an everyday kind” (*Ibid.*, pp. 92-3). He has in mind details like whether in Descartes’ dream, “his lumbago was bothering him” (*Ibid.*, p. 91). According to my suggestion it could not have bothered him unless the experience involved contained a sensation (which had an intensive magnitude) and I simply point out that as a matter of fact the qualitative features of dream experiences lack intensive magnitudes.

But none of these suggestions mentioned intensive magnitudes specifically or developed this idea as a criterion. Most authors simply accept some version of the coherence criterion. Typical of those who accept the coherence criterion is Leslie Stevenson who concludes, “Perhaps the justification for assuming, in any stretch of experience, that one is not then dreaming can be beyond all reasonable doubt, the more that a particular episode of experience involves (what seem like) active bodily movements in perception and consistently-explicable results of them (Descartes himself has suggested something to the effect on the last page of the *Meditations* [see note 8]). *One* pinch may not be enough to achieve justification, but a coherent set of results from a whole series of such active tests might suffice.” (Stevenson (1995), pp. 167-89). Clearly on my view one pinch *is* enough: if it hurts you are awake: something that hurts can’t ‘seem like’ it hurts, if it hurts, it hurts: this aspect of the sensation (its intensive magnitude) is the sign of its origin in an external energy source. Hoke Robinson points out

that Kant uses a coherence principle to distinguish dream experiences from waking experiences “But when we want to know whether an experience is a dream or not, we do not ask whether the categories are involved at all – internally they certainly are – but whether they can connect the dream context as a whole consistently to the rest of objective experience.” (Robinson (1984), p. 383), as did Descartes “A dreamer cannot really connect his dreams with the ideas of past events, though he may dream that he does. For everyone admits that a man may be deceived in his sleep but afterwards, when he wakes up he will easily recognize his mistake.” Descartes, *Sixth Meditation*. (Descartes (1984), p.61). An anonymous referee pointed out that Descartes only took the coherence criterion to answer the skeptical question “how do I know I’m not dreaming” in the light of the proof for God’s existence and the guarantee of what we perceive clearly and distinctly. In the absence of such a guarantee, he continued, the coherence criterion does not provide an answer to the skeptical problem at all. Berkeley is able to use the coherence criterion as an answer to the skeptical problem because he treats it simply as constitutive of what differentiates dreaming from waking experience that the former is incoherent and the latter coherent. There is no world outside the experience to which the experience might correspond or not.

I agree and, unlike the perspicuous Berkeley, Descartes’ question-begging presumption throughout the dream argument is that, while we *do* make the distinction between dreaming and waking experiences and that we all know that dream experiences have no counterpart in reality, we actually *cannot* at any given time tell the difference between waking experiences and dreams. So we can tell the difference and we cannot. But ignoring the contradiction involved in these contrary claims Descartes takes advantage of it and draws his skeptical conclusion: if dreams are acknowledged not to have counterparts in reality then the same applies to waking experiences given that we *cannot* tell the difference between the two types of

experiences via phenomenological or coherence criteria. And this, of course, leaves hanging the question “ How did we ever come to tell them apart in the first place (something Descartes assumes we can do) to which my answer is: *via* a phenomenological criterion, viz. intensive magnitudes.

The same referee then claimed that my arguments do not really address successfully the skeptical problem, since the fact that I might dream that I am in pain, even if in my dreams I am not in pain, means that I cannot use the presence of intensive magnitudes to quiet the skeptic.

I quiet the sceptic by pointing out that only in terms of my reply to Descartes’ challenge (there are “no certain signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep”) can this sort of scepticism be squelched, namely, by a direct appeal to phenomenological facts which are evident to anyone once they are pointed out. Thus I say to the sceptic: “When you dreamt that you were in pain did it hurt?” My argument is that the reply of the sceptic will be: “Say, now that you mention it, it didn’t hurt! So that’s where all the confusion lay! Now I can see that dream pains are pain experiences in a very different sense of the word ‘experience’ just as Malcolm had foretold, (see footnote five) and the difference is that such experiences lack intensive magnitudes.”) with a nod to Malcolm’s questioning of the intelligibility of the whole sceptical scenario¹⁰.

¹⁰ For example, Wahl and Westphal make the Malcolm connection as follows: “Descartes’ ultimate view is that, if someone is awake, then he can know that he is by the presence of clarity and distinctness in the interrelation of his present and past perceptions. But if he is asleep, he may believe that he is awake because he dreams that his perceptions are interrelated in the same sort of way. But ‘everyone admits that a man may be deceived in his sleep.’ [see note 7]... Cottingham describes the experience as one in which we have the ‘subjective experience of performing the test and finding it satisfied’. But a person who merely has this subjective experience has not performed the test. ‘Dreaming that one makes a prediction is not predicting, dreaming that one

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makes a test is not testing, dreaming that one draws a conclusion is not concluding". [Norman Malcom, *Dreaming*, London 1959, p. 112]. (Wahl and Westphal (1992), p. 180).

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