

Dreams and Reality

How do I know I'm not dreaming? More specifically, how do I know I'm not dreaming right now, at this very moment? As I look around myself I appear to be sitting in a room with a group of other people, but what if this is all a dream? How can I be certain that it is *not* a dream?

Come to think of it, how do you know *you* are not dreaming – right now, at this moment? An obvious answer is to pinch yourself. But that doesn't really work. If I pinch myself I can feel it; it is moderately painful, sufficiently painful to wake up anyone who is not in a coma or very deeply drugged. But this is misleading. What if the pinch is also part of the dream I'm having right now?

This very question is also misleading, in its own way. It presupposes a distinction between dreams on the one hand and what is called 'objective reality' on the other. For how can I be certain that there really is such a distinction?

Ordinarily the distinction between dreams and reality is clear enough. Dreams are haphazard, disjointed, sometimes vivid, sometimes vague, and they never last. We always wake up, sooner or later. And when we are awake, our experiences are very different from dream-experiences. Continuity and consistency are the main characteristics of the way we experience the world around us – people and objects do not appear or disappear at random in time or in space. But this is what often seems to happen in dreams.

Of course, daily life itself contains plenty of irregularities and surprises. That's part of its fun – and sometimes its hazards. Wouldn't life be dull if it followed the same old tramlines of fixed regularity all of the time?

But let us not digress. Quality of perception is yet another issue. If I am under the influence of drink or drugs – even moderately – then the way I experience the world around me will be affected, one way or another. This is well known. But quite apart from drink or drugs, there is still a residue of awkward or niggling questions which remain. The 'official' commonsense view is that we perceive physical objects through our five senses, sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. The difficulty is that we often make perceptual mistakes. Optical illusions are well known. Because of this, how can we accept the evidence of our senses

as reliable? This is a reasonable question, but it is unwise to jump to conclusions. We do make perceptual mistakes some of the time, but it does not follow that we do so all of the time. The tricky thing is, how do we tell the difference?

However, there is an even more fundamental issue, a set of problems or apparent problems which need to be sorted out. This is the notion of 'solipsism'. Solipsism is the theory – or the conjecture, as some would prefer to put it – that I alone am the only thing that exists and that what I see or think I see around me is all in my own mind, and has no separate, independent existence apart from myself. This is a bizarre, crazy notion, but how can we prove that it is false? Some have said that strictly speaking, it is irrefutable.

Others have said that if it is irrefutable, or apparently irrefutable, this is not a strength of the theory, it is a weakness, a fatal one at that. This needs some explanation. The logical positivists held that if a statement or a theory or any other sort of idea cannot be proved or disproved, then it is pure conjecture. Of course there can be practical reasons why an idea or theory cannot be tested, but if an idea or theory cannot be tested even in principle, then it is neither true nor false but literally meaningless.

Arguably, this applies to solipsism, which many philosophers dismiss as a pseudo-problem, a matter of pure conjecture and little else. It is perhaps a 'brain teaser', and (let us be fair) brain teasers have their uses. It could be, of course, that brain teasers are what philosophy is all about, but there can be differences of view on this question. Some philosophers take this view quite seriously, as against those who maintain that philosophy should be concerned with the 'big questions' such as what is the Meaning of Life, Destiny and so on. The difficulty is, by what methodology can we obtain determinate answers to vague questions such as "what is the meaning of life?" It is worth remembering that if you ask a vague question, you'll get a vague answer....

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